The Meredith Marriage

By Harold Payne,

Author of "A Queen of Finesse," etc.

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NEW YORK:

ROBERT BONNER'S SONS,

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THE CHOICE SERIES: ISSUED MONTHLY. SUBSCRIPTION PRICE, SIX DOLLARS PER ANNUM. NO. 125, JULY 1, 1895. ENTERED AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE AS SECOND CLASS MAIL MATTER.

PZ3
K296 2M

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PRESS OF
THE NEW YORK LEDGER
NEW YORK.

THE MEREDITH MARRIAGE.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

ALONG the steep, rugged and winding road that leads up from the "Brothers Bridge," slowly and painfully toiled an old-fashioned road-wagon, drawn by a span of fat, sleek and lazy horses, and occupied by an old gentleman and a young lady. The sun was just sinking behind the distant hills, touching the tops of the trees and foliage with a little deeper tinge of crimson, a little richer orange, or a little brighter gold than the lavish brush of autumn had bestowed. And its rays kissed the young girl's pink cheeks, shimmered in the gold of her rich, auburn hair and lit up the old man's pallid face and silvery locks.

The old gentleman was engaged in relating the account of some interesting incident, while the girl was listening with the eagerness peculiar to a young and romantic soul, punctuating the narrator's discourse at intervals with a question.

"Yes, it must be about twenty years," said the

story-teller, "since the tragedy, which gave the old bridge and the neighborhood hereabouts the name of 'Brothers Bridge,' occurred."

"Oh, tell me about it, papa!" implored the eager girl. "How did it happen?"

"Well," pursued the father, "it was like this: Two brothers came from Tennessee and settled in the neighborhood, and although they were not only brothers but twins, and resembled each other so closely that one was frequently mistaken for the other, they were deadly enemies. In fact, they belonged to one of those families in Eastern Tennessee which have for years been engaged in those deadly vendettas. I do not remember, if I ever knew, how two brothers of the same family happened to have taken different sides in the quarrel, but such is not an unusual occurrence, and these two brothers hated each other with that intensity of ardor which can only exist between blood relations. It appears that one of them had left his native State for the sole purpose of escaping the persecutions of his enemies, but whether the other followed his example for a like reason, or for the purpose of keeping up the feud, I do not know. At all events, the one was no more than settled upon a farm which he had purchased in the neighborhood, when the other arrived, purchased a farm adjoining that of the first, and from that moment the vendetta was renewed. For years the once peaceful community was disturbed and kept in a state of horror by the mutual persecutions of these two men and their families, until the peaceable citizens began to talk seriously of ridding the neighborhood of these odious neighbors. But, somehow, they never took any decided action, and the vendetta continued.

"At length, one day, the two brothers met, unexpect-

edly, on the bridge we have just crossed. Each was wrought up to the most intense fury at the sight of the other, and, without a word, dismounted from the horse he was riding, and the two brothers engaged in a deadly combat with knives. Nobody knows how long it lasted, but when they were found, several hours later, one of the brothers was dead and the other seriously wounded, and they were entwined in each other's embrace, as they probably had been in their innocent infancy, except that this last embrace was inspired by hatred."

"Did the wounded man die?" interrogated the girl.

"No," rejoined her father, "he ultimately recovered."

"What became of him?"

"The sentiment was so strong against him that he was obliged to sell out and leave the neighborhood, and nobody ever knew what became of him. The family of the murdered man, still remained, however; but as the sons grew up, they also wandered off, the girls married, and the mother finally died. A very strange thing connected with the affair was the fact that the first-born, a son, of each of the twin brothers, was born on the same day, and each son was given the same Christian name, and bore such a striking resemblance to each other that it was almost impossible to distinguish one from the other."

"What was the name of the family, papa?"

"Livingstone."

By this time they had reached the top of the hill, where stood an old-fashioned wayside inn, and the team, from long custom, turned instinctively towards the gate.

"We may as well stop here and get supper," observed the old gentleman, allowing the team to take its course. "A couple of hours' rest for ourselves and the horses,

and a good supper, will fortify us for the remainder of the tedious journey, and we still shall have plenty of time to catch the midnight train."

Fat, jolly landlord Burton, a waddling, wheezing compound of smiles and hospitality, had espied them from a distance and met them at the gate.

"Well, well, well, Squire Meredith!" he wheezed. "And the—the—little lady—"

"This is my daughter Florence," interposed the old gentleman.

"So it is, so it is!" chuckled the fat landlord. "How she has growed, and how beautiful she has got to be! Bless my soul, but she'll be a-breakin' some feller's heart afore long! Bless my soul and body! But git down an' come in! Do!"

And with that, the jolly old fellow bustled about, called out all the help, from the pudgy little kitchen-maid to the tall, lank and cadaverous stable-boy, to assist in getting the distinguished guests and their team housed.

Florence was shown to the best room in the house to make her toilet for supper, which, the landlord assured his guests, would soon be ready, while the two men went into the common-room for a chat before the evening meal. They had been boys together, attending the same district school, and, while their ways of life had drifted widely apart—the one having gone to college and fitted himself for the profession of medicine, which his ample wealth prevented him from following, while the landlord had never advanced beyond the calling of a country tavern-keeper—yet they had always remained warm friends, and were always glad to meet and have a talk over old times. This was their mutual object when they entered the common-room; but, haply, the first question propounded by the

landlord turned the conversation in another direction.

"Which way might ye be a-goin', Wilkins?" he inquired, as soon as they were seated.

"To the railway station at Jonesboro," replied the other.

"Goin' off to the city to spend the winter, I expect?"

"No. The fact is, John," pursued Mr. Meredith, "Florence is going to be married."

"Dew tell!" exclaimed the landlord, with a surprised countenance.

"You see," the other hastened to explain, "she was betrothed to a young man whom we met in Europe last season. He lives in New York, and, while he is comparatively poor, he belongs to one of the oldest and best families, and is himself noble, manly, and extremely talented. He is, in short, an artist of more than ordinary promise."

The landlord shook his head dubiously.

"Bad business, Wilkins," he murmured. "Can't never tell how these chaps 'll turn out. He may do well, and then ag'in he mayn't; and that would be a sorry prospect for a gal like Florence, who 's allus been used to lugzoory."

"Oh, as to the matter of money," laughed Meredith, "have no uneasiness on that score, John. My fortune will all go to Florence, anyway; and if her husband should fail to make a living—although I do not doubt that he will—they will have plenty. She is sincerely in love with him, and I believe him to be a man who can make her happy, and that is the main point. I know him to be a gentleman, and shall allow her to have her own way. I know too well myself the misery of enforced marriages to try to coerce my own daughter in the matter."

"I reckon ye do, Wilkins. I reckon ye do. You 'd 'a' been a happier man if ye 'd 'a' married t' other gal. But how is it ye be a-goin' on to meet him, instead o' him a-comin' on here?"

"This is a matter entirely between ourselves, John," rejoined Meredith, after some reflection, for he knew the landlord's weakness for gossiping, "and must go no further."

"Oh, I wouldn't say nuthin' 'bout it for the world," vowed old John. "Whutever ye tell me goes no furder, depend upon it."

"The fact is," resumed the old gentleman, "as I told you, my prospective son-in-law is poor, and cannot afford the display which would be expected of him if he came on here, and is also too proud to accept assistance from me for the present. So we have agreed to meet him in New York, where they will be married in a quiet way, and for the present the matter will be kept a secret. The neighbors suppose she is simply going off to spend a few months with some friend in the city."

At this juncture the supper-bell rang, and the instinct of the host superseding everything else, the landlord arose and conducted his guest into the dining-room, where he was soon joined by his daughter, and they sat down to a plain but substantial repast.

Florence was a tall, symmetrically formed woman, with every curve just what an artist would dream but could never imitate, and every line a line of beauty. Her face was of rare *spirituelle*, almost ethereal mold, with just sufficient blending of a more voluptuous strain to give the lips a ruddier tinge and a slightly sensuous curl, and the deep-sea blue of her eyes a more passionate luster than they would otherwise have possessed. Her hair, which was almost phenomenally luxuriant, was a deep, lustrous auburn, and her com-

plexion that delicate pink and white which usually accompanies such hair. Clad as she was in a neatly fitting travelling-dress, there was something bewildering in her beauty as she glided into the dining-room and seated herself beside her father.

They had a table to themselves, and the room was empty when they entered, except for two gentlemen who sat at a table on the opposite side. The two strangers were evidently deeply impressed—even startled—at the appearance of the beautiful girl in this out-of-the-way place, and stared at her with the wonder and admiration they might have done at a celestial being. Indeed, so ardent and persistent was their scrutiny that the girl became annoyed, and changed her position to avoid their gaze. And yet she could not help taking a good deal of interest in the strangers on account of their appearance, which was as much out of place at this wayside inn as her own.

One was a tall man, evidently past the meridian of life, with gray hair and beard and a complexion of that excessively dark olive only to be encountered along the pampas of South America or the keys of Florida, and eyes as black as the sloe. His companion was his very antithesis in everything except height. He was also tall and possessed a magnificent athletic figure, a fair complexion, blue eyes and amber-colored hair, which curled about his temples in true artistic clusters. Indeed, he was what almost any woman would call a very handsome man, and was not more than twenty-five years old.

The older man wore an expression of settled melancholy peculiar to men who have seen much of the world and have been disappointed in what they found; while his companion's face was ever wreathed in smiles, as though he looked upon life as a perpetual comedy.

When Florence had shifted her position so that the strangers could no longer ogle her, she pretended to forget their presence and entered into conversation with her father concerning her future.

"Why do you consider it unlikely, papa," she began, "that Sydney will meet us at Jonesboro?"

"From the uncertain tone of his telegram," rejoined her father. "He said 'if possible,' which he would not have said if there had been no question about his coming. In my letter in reply to his, in which he proposed coming on and returning with us, simply for the purpose of relieving the tedium of the journey, I mentioned that it would be a loss of time as well as a waste of money to do so, and he may have come to the same conclusion. You know he told us that every moment was precious to him until he had completed his picture for the exhibition?"

"I remember," mused Florence, staring reflectively into space. "Nevertheless, I should think he might spare that much time—if he—"

The girl stopped suddenly, and a crimson flush mantled her beautiful features. Her father studied her face for a second or two and seemed a trifle perplexed.

"What!" he ejaculated at last; "doubting already, my daughter? Tut, tut! This will never do."

Florence's eyes drooped, and she made no attempt at an answer. Her father also remained silent, meanwhile glancing about the room for the first time since entering it. There had been several fresh arrivals, and he glanced at each face in turn, with the carelessness of one who has no other object than idle curiosity; but when he encountered at last the piercing gaze of the dark gentleman, he was slightly startled. He also grew a trifle uneasy at the manner in which the stranger eyed Florence. He refrained from communicating his

thoughts to her, however, and, assuming a cheerful countenance, resumed conversation. But he had scarcely done so, when a servant approached the table and handed him a card on which was engraved :

SYDNEY PARKINSON.
ARTIST.
New York.

Mr. Meredith glanced at the card with a puzzled expression, and then handed it to his daughter, with the remark :

"Your heart seems to have been a better criterion than my judgment, my dear."

Then turning to the attendant, he said :

"Show the gentleman in."

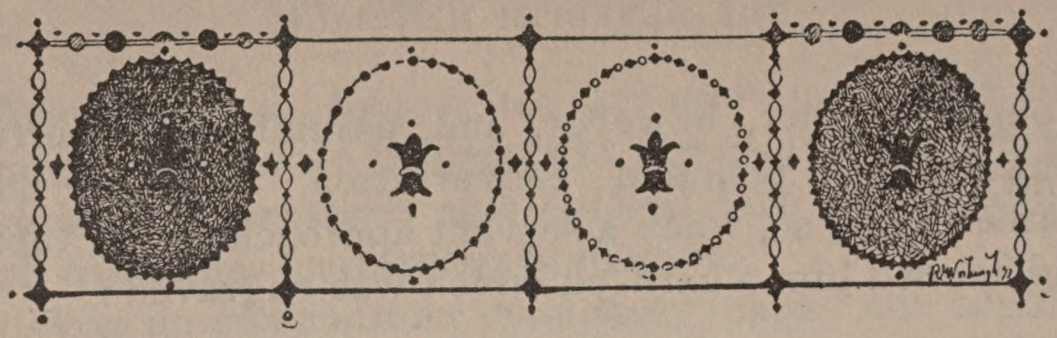
The attendant withdrew, and the old gentleman turned again to his daughter, whom he found with her eyes riveted on the card, while a deep crimson flame burned in her face.

"This is rather an unexpected pleasure, eh, my dear ?" he said, smiling and chafing his hands.

Florence nodded affirmatively, without removing her eyes from the card.

"I wonder," she faltered, "how he thought of coming on here !"

"I cannot tell. Possibly he came on an earlier train than he anticipated, and, not finding us at the station, concluded to come on and surprise us. But we need not speculate on the matter any further, for here he is to answer for himself."



CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE WEDDING.

As the old gentleman spoke, a tall, handsome young man bounded into the room, and, after glancing about hesitatingly for a moment, curiously approached the table where our friends sat. Meredith was too much excited to notice the newcomer's diffidence, and springing from his chair, grasped him warmly by the hand.

"How are you, my boy!" he cried exuberantly. "Sit down."

Parkinson stammered some sort of response to the very hospitable welcome, for it was evident that he was greatly embarrassed, and then hastened to salute Florence and grasp her proffered hand. But somehow there was a formality about his greeting, in spite of an obvious effort on his part to appear cordial and gracious, that sent a chill to the girl's heart. What could it mean? she asked herself. Had some terrible change come over him since they had last met? Surely this was not the impetuous lover who had poured out his tale of love in such burning, passionate tropes, as they strolled along the romantic Danube, climbed the vine-clad Johannisberg or rowed upon Leman's blue waters, as to carry the heart by storm!

The old gentleman saw nothing of it, however, and, having got his prospective son-in-law seated, resumed:

"This is indeed an unexpected pleasure, my boy! Now tell us, before you allow another minute to elapse, how you came to drive on here instead of awaiting us at the station, as we expected you would."

Parkinson had some difficulty in overcoming his agitation sufficiently to reply at once, but, after a short struggle, as it seemed, he gained the mastery of his emotions enough to say:

"It was due entirely to a mistake in the time of the arrival of trains, sir. I might have taken a train which left New York two hours later, and it would have landed me at the little station over here in plenty of time; but, as it was, I found myself put down at the stupid place, at least, two hours ahead of the time at which you were expected, and I had the alternative of waiting there or driving out to meet you. I chose the latter."

"But how did you know that we would be here, my boy?"

"I did not. Having come this far without meeting you, and concluding that you had been delayed by some cause, I decided to stop here for supper and drive on to your house afterward. I made myself known to the stout individual outside, and asked him to have some of his help look out for you and warn me in case of your passing along the road. But the instant he discovered who I was, he volunteered the information, not only that you were here, but that I was to wed your daughter."

"Just like honest, gossipy old John," laughed Meredith. "It has not been half an hour since I confided the fact to him, charging him not to reveal it to a living soul, which he solemnly promised to obey, and

now he lets it out to the first person that comes along. Everybody in the community will know it inside of a few hours. But tell us, what is your plan for the future? Return to-night or remain here over night and go over in the morning?"

The young man hesitated, meanwhile glancing tentatively at Florence and coloring a little.

"I have a plan," he at length faltered. "I do not know what you and Florence will think of it. You will probably consider it rash and impractical."

"What is it, my boy?" demanded Meredith, eagerly. "We are ready to consider any plan which may be most agreeable and convenient to you, eh, Florry?"

The girl nodded affirmatively, but a vague shadow of regret belied the action. But her father in his eagerness failed to notice it, and turned to Parkinson for the answer.

"My plan," pursued the latter, "although, as I say, it may not meet your approval, was to—to go to some minister (I suppose you know of one near here) and—and have the ceremony performed, after which Florence and I could take the train for New York."

"A capital idea!" declared the old gentleman, enthusiastically. "We shall do that the first thing in the morning, and that will give Florry's mother a chance to witness the ceremony. You see, she wasn't well enough to travel as far as New York, but I'll warrant she'll make out to get as far as the chapel."

"Pardon my apparent parsimony of time," interposed Parkinson, glancing furtively at Florence, "but I must get back to the city as soon as possible. The picture upon which I am engaged must be done against the opening of the Exposition, and every minute counts."

Mr. Meredith glanced at his daughter, and, although her eyes were fixed upon the table, he could not but

remark the shadow of regret or repugnance or something—he did not know exactly what—but it sent a dull sort of pang, somewhat resembling remorse, tingling to his heart, and he felt that perhaps he was not doing right. But he quickly banished the thought when he recalled how devotedly she had professed to love the young artist, and responded :

"Well, I presume there will be no objection to that plan, if Florence has none—and I presume she hasn't. Although, for my own part, I would rather, inasmuch as we are so near, that her mother could be present. If the plan meets with Florry's approval, though, I shall offer no opposition, owing to your hurry to get back to your work. What do you say, my child?"

Florence did not speak or even raise her eyes, while a deadly pallor overcast her face and her lips twitched painfully.

"Why, what on earth is the matter, my child?" demanded her father, in astonishment.

The girl strove heroically to make some sort of reply, but her tongue appeared to cleave to the roof of her mouth. The young man eyed her curiously, but offered no suggestion.

"My dear child," expostulated her father, "if there is the least objection on your part, you needn't do it. We should only do this thing to accommodate Sydney, whose time is so precious ; but, of course, we cannot forget your comfort. At the same time," he went on, in a more practical tone, after a pause, "you must not forget that it is a wife's first duty to look to the interest of her husband, and if I were you, I should begin my schooling in that direction by making just this one little self-sacrifice at the outset."

Florence felt the rebuke keenly, and determined to make a heroic effort. She raised her eyes for a brief

instant to those of her betrothed, and as quickly dropped them again, while a shudder convulsed her slender form. Her eyes had refused to tell her what her heart proclaimed. Her eyes told her that this was the man who, nearly a year ago, at Baden-Baden, had won her heart; but that same heart now refused to acknowledge the conquest. Why, she could not tell, She was bewildered, confused, angry with herself, and finally gave vent to her feelings in a flood of tears.

Her father was at a loss to account for her conduct. and her lover was equally bewildered; but he treated the matter with unaccountable coolness and philosophy. And they were both equally perplexed as to what to do under the circumstances, so they tacitly decided to do nothing at all, and a rather awkward silence followed. At the conclusion of the meal—which had begun with such hope of pleasure and ended so drearily—the two gentlemen withdrew to the common-room, with the tacit understanding that it would be better to leave the girl to herself for a while. Here they discussed the future plans and prospects of the young couple over a cigar, and at the end of half an hour rejoined Florence in the parlor.

To their surprise and gratification, her fit of doubt and despondency had vanished and given place to her usual cheerfulness.

"Ah, my dear," cried her father, "I am glad to see that you have banished your foolish apprehensions and become yourself again!"

Florence smiled and kissed her father affectionately, but offered no explanation of her late conduct. She still dared not raise her eyes to those of her lover, but when he approached her and took her hand in his own, she smiled and strove very hard to appear content and happy. He, however, was too much a man of the world

not to see the effort it cost her. Assuming that his daughter would offer no further protest against the arrangement proposed by Parkinson, the old gentleman said :

"Now I'll leave you for a moment and go and see the landlord and have him send for a minister."

And, without another word, he turned and left the room.

As soon as they were left to themselves Sydney took Florence in his arms, and, pressing her closely to his heart, murmured in a gentle tone :

"Is it possible that my little Florence no longer loves me ?"

The girl struggled with her emotions for a minute or so, and at length mastered them sufficiently to speak.

"No. I still love you, Sydney, devotedly ; but something tells me you have changed. You do not seem quite the same as when we were together last year. It is foolish, I know, but my heart tells me that—that—we should not—"

She paused and hid her face.

"I see," interposed he. "You were about to say we should not get married to-night. Very well. Be it so, Florence. Far be it from me to urge you against your inclination !"

And releasing her, he strode away from her across the room.

Then, for the first time, a full realization of her conduct flashed upon her. And in that moment, too, she realized how madly she loved the man she had repulsed, and how her cruel words must have stung his gentle, sensitive soul. She hesitated an instant, and stole a glance after the retreating figure, and then her impulsive soul prompted her action. She crept timidly to his

side and laid her hand gently upon his arm. Sydney turned in his walk and looked down into her upturned, beseeching eyes. The cloud vanished from his face, his heart bounded with joy, and the next instant the lovers were entwined in each other's arms.

"Forgive me, Sydney!" sobbed the girl, burying her face in his bosom. "Can you ever forgive your little Florence?"

"My own, sweet girl!" exclaimed Sydney. "I have nothing to forgive. It was all my own fault! Some unaccountable spell came over me when I first beheld you in the dining-room, and, for the life of me, I could not dispel the feeling of embarrassment and diffidence that came over me, and that is why I appeared changed to you. But my little Florence no longer doubts me, does she?"

"No, no, no! A thousand times no, Sydney!"

"Her little heart no longer tells her that I am not the same man with whom she roved the sunny hills of France and the vine-clad banks of the Rhine last year?"

"No, no, no, Sydney! I no longer doubt you! My foolish heart was mistaken, that is all. But—but—you were not quite the same, dear, when you first came in to-night, and—"

"I know I was not, love," he interposed, "and for that reason I do not blame you. The fact is, darling, I live in such an atmosphere of sordid cynicism in the professional world that it requires an hour or so in your sunshine to thaw me out. After spending nearly a year among the selfish egotists of the art world, I am not fit to come in contact with such a sunny little creature as my Florence. I am like one of those white peaks we used to gaze at from the heights of Lucerne, all covered with frost. And that, above everything else, is the reason why I desire to hasten our marriage. I fear

that much longer association with the soulless world will reduce me to the same condition as the other members of it. With my sunny-hearted little Florence with me as an antidote, however, I can defy a world of cynicism !"

"Oh, how good it is to hear you speak in that way, dear Sydney ! It is so like your dear old self. Do you know that when we used to go boating on Lake Leman, and you would go on, in your beautiful, poetical language, describing how Byron and Shelley had often paddled over the same crystal waters, with each soul full of song, I used to gaze at you with the same awe and admiration that we looked at old Mont Blanc ! But," she suddenly broke off, "you have told me nothing about your mother. You spoke of her being dangerously ill the last time you wrote !"

Before he had time to reply, the old gentleman burst into the room with a glowing face suffused with smiles, and announced that everything was in readiness.

"Just the cutest and most romantic arrangement you ever saw !" he declared, rapturously, chafing his hands, "and all the doings of the fat publican whom you were inclined to sneer at, Sydney."

"Indeed ?" laughed the young man. "Well, I *am* surprised to hear of anything romantic emanating from his brain ! He is the nearest approach to my idea of Falstaff of any one I ever saw off the stage."

"Never mind," expostulated Mr. Meredith. "In spite of apparent grossness, the old man has a great, big heart, and more romance than you would imagine."

"Indeed, I should say that his dimensions permitted such a thing. But what is the arrangement, Mr. Meredith ?"

"Why, there is a little chapel buried away among the old forest trees across the stream below, and the

landlord has made arrangements for the minister to meet us there."

"Just the thing!" declared Sydney, enthusiastically. "What says my little Florence?"

For the life of her, the girl could not repress that same feeling of dread that had come over her on first seeing the artist that night. But with a desperate effort she shook it off enough to say, half-heartedly:

"Yes, that will be splendid, Sydney!"

Amidst the excitement that followed, the others paid little heed to Florence, except in a general way, and failed to notice the cloud of regret that hung over her features and bespoke the aching, rebellious heart within, else probably it would have caused them to pause. Half an hour later the party, consisting of the young couple, Mr. Meredith, the fat landlord and his wife and one or two of the servants, were on their way to the little chapel.

CHAPTER III.

A VOICE OF WARNING.

The weather being delightful, the party chose to walk the short distance to the chapel, and set off in pairs. Sydney and Florence took the lead, and when they were alone once more, he could not help but feel, rather than see, that the same fit of doubt which he had noticed before again oppressed her; but, instead of alluding to it this time, he chose what he deemed the wiser course of attempting to dissipate it with his own good humor. To that end he began a lively conversation, full of the glowing reminiscences of their continental tour, bubbling with poetry and glittering with imagery. To all of which Florence listened with respectful silence rather than the breathless interest she had evinced upon former occasions. But as they descended the long hill leading down to Brothers Bridge, and the soft autumnal breeze, scented with a thousand woodland spices, swept up the river and kissed her fresh, young cheek, and the night-bird cooed far in the depths of the forest, her despondency vanished somewhat, and she experienced a slight thrill of the joy she had felt when they walked the star-lit night together long ago, and he breathed his devotion for the first time. And when she looked up into the star-studded vault of heaven and beheld the calm and peace there, it seemed to be a cheerful omen of her future, and she was happy.

As they passed on to the approach of the bridge, the recollection of the story her father had told her of the tragedy which had occurred there flashed upon Florence with vivid horror, and she could not repress a shudder. At the same time she imagined she saw a figure standing near the railing on one side of the bridge and about half-way across. It appeared to be partly concealed in a dark patch of shadow, but a ray of moonlight glanced across one side of it, bringing that portion of it out in bold relief. So it appeared to Florence; but when she called the attention of her companion to it, he professed to see nothing and laughed at her apprehension.

"It is nothing, my dear," he said, "but the peculiar refraction of the moonlight as it falls against the abutment of the bridge. My little girl must not be afraid, especially as she is with me."

"Oh, I am not afraid," replied Florence, restraining her teeth from chattering with an effort; "but I am sure there is some one there, Sydney."

"And I am just as positive that there is not," rejoined the young man, laughing. "However, if there is, we shall soon see."

And they walked on at a brisk pace to the spot where the imaginary apparition had been, and, as Sydney had predicted, there was no one there. He called her attention to the fact, and again laughed at her for her foolish apprehension. Florence also forced a laugh. And the couple sauntered to the opposite side of the bridge, where they paused to look down into the swiftly flowing river, intending to await the approach of the rest of the party. But as the others were a long way behind, Sydney and Florence had time to become oblivious to their surroundings in the dreamy contemplation of the receding current. Florence's reverie had not lasted

long, although she had unconsciously wandered a few feet from her lover, when she was suddenly awakened by something touching her arm gently. She turned, and her first impulse was to scream, but as there was nothing there except the darkness, her embarrassment sealed her lips, and then, before she had time for a second thought, there came out of the empty space a voice that whispered:

"*If you value your future happiness, do not go to the chapel with this man!*"

Florence was too much frightened for the instant to speak, but hastened to the side of her lover, just as the balance of the party came up. And then Sydney proceeded to tell them about the girl's imaginary specter, which caused them all to laugh very heartily, and she felt less inclined to mention the latest incident than ever, lest she should be laughed at. And the merriment that followed prevented any of them from noticing the mingled pain and terror depicted in the poor, agonizing girl's face, and they walked on over the bridge.

Florence could find no heart to enter into the conversation that followed, and proceeded in silence. Her thoughts were busy, however, and by the time she had reached the chapel, she had nearly nerved herself up to the resolution of objecting to the proceedings. And when they had entered the half-lighted old chapel, with its ghostly shadows, which the fluttering candles caused to dance and assume the most weird shapes, the old feeling of distrust came upon her so strong that she could no longer resist it, and determined to rebel before it was too late. She called her father aside with a view of protesting, but at the last moment her courage failed her, and she allowed herself to be led to the altar.

The minister was already there, and the moment the bridal party arrived he began the ceremony. The preacher, who was an aged man, spoke in a low, solemn tone, which could barely be heard above the gentle night-wind, which caused the trees outside to sigh weirdly and to rub their impatient old limbs against the old church and shake off their russet leaves in showers. And all this seemed to be in harmony with the rebellious state of the faltering bride's soul. And then when the old minister came to the point where he asks the question, "If any one has aught to say why this marriage should not be solemnized," etc., everybody was suddenly startled by a voice emanating from no one knew where, saying :

"*I forbid the banns! Unless you wish to make this hapless girl wretched for life, this wedding must not go on!*"

The greatest confusion followed.

The old minister stopped and cast his eyes quickly about in search of the objector, and seeing no one except the little group in front of the altar, looked perplexed. Sydney remained inexplicably calm, but Florence grew deathly pale and clutched his arm and looked around with a terrified face ; while Meredith, the landlord and the servants ran outside with a view to discovering the owner of the voice. But they soon returned without finding him. Whoever the objector was, he had made his escape. When this had been reported, the minister recovered his usual calmness and said :

"Inasmuch as the objector has not the honesty or courage to show his face, we shall not consider his protest, and proceed with the ceremony."

This incident had the effect of increasing Florence's repugnance to the marriage and her desire to raise her

own voice in protest ; but, struggle as she would, she could not summon courage to speak, and remained silent to the end. But when the end came and she realized that she was a wife against her will, the courage which had thus far sustained her suddenly fled, and she swooned.

"Too much excitement," suggested the minister.

"More like she was skeered at that pesky fool's voice," interposed the landlord's wife, as she bent over the unconscious girl and proceeded to chafe her hands. The good woman also gave orders for such restoratives as could be most readily procured.

In the meantime, in accordance with Mr. Meredith's orders, the team had been hitched to the road-wagon and driven up in front of the chapel.

In the course of half an hour Florence had been restored to consciousness, and declared herself able to travel. She was, therefore, assisted into the vehicle, after which her father and her husband took their seats and drove away from the chapel. They waited in front of the inn long enough to bid farewell to old John and his wife, and the fat landlord took occasion to whisper to Meredith :

"A bad start, mind my words !"

The old gentleman laughed at his simplicity.

"Just your superstition, John," he said. "The fact of some mischievous wag calling in at the window signifies nothing."

"But the gal's faintin' ?" persisted the landlord.

"Was nothing unnatural under the circumstances. Good-by. Don't worry over the matter, John, for everything will come out right in the end."

"I hope so, I am sure !" muttered the fat host. "But—" and he went off shaking his head.

Florence sat limp and spiritless, supported by her

newly-made husband's arm, upon a back seat, while her father sat in front and drove. Sydney bent over his bride tenderly and tried, by every art known to him, to soothe and comfort her. She strove heroically, and succeeded so far as to laugh half-heartedly at his droll sayings and witticisms, but she could not muster spirit enough to enter into the conversation. Nor could she rid herself of her feeling of dread, and kept glancing from one side of the road to the other with a terrified expression, as if in constant fear of some calamity. She would start at every sound or movement at the roadside or weird shape produced by the shadows of trees and shrubbery, while in her ears constantly rang the prophetic warning : "*If you value your future happiness, do not go to the chapel with this man!*"

Her father was too much engrossed, for a long time, in Sydney's spirited discourse to take any note of Florence's depression, but at length, during a temporary lull in the conversation, he turned and glanced back at her, and was startled by the white, apprehensive face of his daughter.

"Why, what can be the matter with you to-night, Florry?" he questioned, anxiously. "You are usually so talkative and full of spirits ; but to-night you are as glum as a deacon. One would think you were going to your own funeral instead of upon your wedding-tour."

"I do not know, papa," she responded, feebly. "I—"

But here she lost her voice and courage at one and the same time, and lapsed into silence again.

"Oh, she will be all right as soon as we get on our way East," predicted Sydney, carelessly. "My little girl is a little depressed over the curious happenings of to-night, but she will soon forget all about them, especially when she assumes dictatorship of our little

flat, which, although not expensively, is at least cozily fitted up, and, I venture to predict, will please my little wife, unless she has lost the artistic taste which she used to possess."

"Ah, I almost envy you the happiness in store for you in such a cozy nest," interjected the old gentleman, encouragingly. "But even there you will require money, my boy, and—"

"Do not worry on that score, Mr. Meredith," interrupted Sydney, with an air of pride. "I always manage to have enough for all practical purposes, artist and bohemian though I am."

"But there may be extra calls upon your resources now, my boy, and—"

"In which case," again interrupted the artist, "I shall have to hustle about and increase my resources, that is all."

"Just what I was afraid of," put in the old gentleman, catching at the opportunity, "and for that very reason I shall insist upon your accepting this trifling token of my esteem—not as a bounty, mind you, for I know you would not accept it as such, but as a token of esteem from one friend to another."

Here he tendered the young man a well-filled purse.

"While I appreciate your kindness, Mr. Meredith," rejoined Sydney, spurning the proffered purse, "I really—"

"No, but I insist," urged the other, "and will hear to nothing else."

The young man still declined the offer, but ultimately allowed himself to be prevailed upon to accept it.

While this scene was passing, Florence's attention was drawn in quite another direction. While they were passing through a dark piece of wood she heard, or imagined she heard, the sound of horses' hoofs

behind them, and when they emerged into the moonlight her conjecture was confirmed by the appearance of two horsemen, who rode out of the wood a short distance behind the vehicle. Her father and her husband took no note of the occurrence, owing to absorption in their own affairs, and Florence did not call their attention to it for fear of being ridiculed.

The horsemen must have seen that the girl was watching them, which was evidently contrary to their wish, for as soon as she turned her head in their direction, they reined up, and, after a short parley, wheeled and rode back into the shadow of the wood. The occurrence filled Florence with terror, but for some reason she could not make up her mind to speak of the matter to her friends. However, as they proceeded on their journey, and she saw no more of the horsemen, she gradually managed to dispel her feeling of dread, although she firmly believed the two men had some evil design upon her or her companions.

At length the station was reached, and as it wanted nearly half an hour to train time, the party were compelled to wait at the lonesome little depot. Here they discussed the feasibility of the old gentleman's accompanying them to New York, and finally arrived at the conclusion that owing to the illness of Florence's mother, he had better return home and allow the young couple to go alone. Having settled this point, Mr. Meredith and Sydney went out upon the platform to see whether the train was in sight or not, leaving Florence alone in the waiting-room. She sat on one of the benches that flanked the wall, peculiar to the seats in railway waiting-rooms, and directly behind her was a window. Her friends had no more than left her, when this window was raised with a quick movement and the faces of two men appeared at it. The girl nearly fainted

HE RUSHED UP TO THE OLD GENTLEMAN AND GRASPED HIM BY THE HAND.—*See Page* 33.

at the sight, for they were the same that she had seen that evening in the dining-room of the inn.

"Don't be afraid of us, young lady," spoke the elder man, in a kindly tone and slightly foreign accent. "We intend you no harm, but would befriend you. Come, if you wish to escape a fate worse zan death, you must allow us to rescue you from zis man before eet eez too late."

Florence sprang to her feet and ran back to the middle of the room; and at the same instant the door on the opposite side opened and her father and her husband entered. The train had rolled up to the platform, and before she had time to utter a word, the girl was bustled aboard, administered a hasty kiss to her father, and the train started.

The old gentleman still stood watching with tearful eyes the receding monster as it gradually buried itself in distance and gloom, when a rumble and shriek announced the arrival of the train from the East. A moment later, the incoming train stopped alongside the platform, and a solitary passenger got off. He rushed up to the old gentleman and grasped him by the hand.

The man was Sydney Parkinson—that is, the real Sydney Parkinson.

CHAPTER IV.

A MUTUAL VOW.

Mr. Meredith was speechless with astonishment, and stared at the newcomer with a dazed expression, but could utter no word.

"How are you, Mr. Meredith?" cried the new arrival, still shaking his hand vehemently. "Where is Florence?"

It was not till now that a full realization of what had happened came to the poor old man, and it stunned him. He needed no additional proof to convince him that this, and not the other man, was Sydney Parkinson, and he knew that the man who had married his daughter and was now on his way to the East was a fraud. He also understood now the cause of Florence's distrust. Her heart had, indeed, been a better criterion than his judgment.

His only answer to the newcomer's question was to raise his tremblIng hand and point in the direction of the vanished East-bound train, and mutter the monosyllable, "There!" And the visible world swam before his eyes for an instant and then disappeared, and the old man reeled and would have fallen to the floor but for the intervention of Sydney, who caught him in his arms.

The young man called some of the station hands to

assist him, and Mr. Meredith was carried into the waiting-room. Here a couch was improvised and the unconscious man laid upon it. Restoratives were applied, and it was not long before he returned to consciousness. As the old man opened his eyes and beheld the face of the young artist bending over him, he gazed long and earnestly at it, as if to make sure that there was no mistake this time. After studying the face for several minutes, he finally murmured:

"Yes, yes, it is he! Thank God!"

"Don't you know me, Mr. Meredith?" questioned Sydney in a kindly voice.

"Yes, my boy, I know you now; but I wasn't sure at first. I was in doubt whether it was not that serpent who robbed me of my child—my poor, innocent Florence! She knew she was being deceived. Her heart told her she was being deceived, although her eyes had told her another story. How well I know now the meaning of her nervousness and doubt! How blind I must have been not to have seen it then, before it was too late! But I thought it was you, Sydney. God knows I did!"

This was all such an enigma to the artist, who knew nothing of the circumstances, that he was inclined to think the old gentleman had lost his senses. He had understood from the latter's strange actions and few remarks just prior to his fainting that Florence had gone, and he also inferred that she was accompanied by some man, but of the particulars of the case he knew nothing.

"I do not understand the meaning of this, Mr. Meredith," he said. "Am I to understand that Florence has eloped with some other man?"

"No, no, no! God forbid that I should say that!" cried the half-distracted father. "No, she did not

elope with him! The villain stole her, body and soul!"

"Did you offer no resistance?" demanded the other, more perplexed than ever. "Could you not procure assistance to defeat the ends of a single man? I confess that I do not understand it all."

"Try to resist him?" echoed the old man, reflectively. "No. On the contrary, it was through my assistance, even to the extent of giving him money, that he was able to steal her away."

"You astound me, sir!" cried the young man in consternation. "In that case, it is quite evident that you were willing that he, instead of I, should—"

"No, no, no!" interrupted Meredith. "You do not understand. I was not willing that he should marry Florence; that is, he as the person whom I now know him to be. You must know that I thought all along that he was yourself, Sydney."

Parkinson was more puzzled than ever. He stared vacantly and with a knit brow into the old man's face for some time before speaking, and it was evident that he still believed him to be raving.

"Tell me," he at length faltered, "how was it possible that you should have mistaken another man for myself, Mr. Meredith?"

"Why, my dear boy, he is the very image of you! Not only this, he was familiar with circumstances connected with our tour on the continent, even to confidential conversations between you and myself and between yourself and Florence, which it seems impossible that anybody but ourselves should know anything about."

"This is most remarkable! Did he call himself Parkinson?"

"Yes; Sydney Parkinson. Here," pursued the old

gentleman, fumbling in his pockets for the impostor's card, and, finding it, handing it to Sydney, "is the card he gave me."

"An exact copy of my own," observed Parkinson, after scanning the card hastily. "The consummate scoundrel! Let us lose no time in getting on his track!"

"No, we must delay no longer. What time does the next train go East?"

"I shall find out," said Sydney, starting off.

In a few minutes he returned, with the information that the next train did not go till six something in the morning.

"Very well," said the old gentleman, rising from his couch. "That will give us time to get back home and provide ourselves with more money and other necessaries for the journey, for it may be a long one before we are at the end of it."

"Yes, but long as it may be—even if it extend to the grave—I shall never stop until I have run that scoundrel down and avenged poor Florence's wrongs!" pledged the young man, solemnly.

"And I am with you to the last!" cried Meredith, earnestly. "Here is my hand!"

The two men shook hands warmly, and then hurried out of the station and took their seats in the wagon. A rapid drive of an hour brought them back to the inn, where Meredith was fortunate enough to procure the necessary money for the trip from old John, but refrained from hinting to the landlord what had happened. He even took the precaution to leave Sydney sitting in the wagon, lest the old man, seeing him, would suspect something of the truth. A fresh team was put to the wagon and a servant taken along to fetch it back, and our friends reached the station just in time for the train.

As soon as they were settled in their seats, the two men began the discussion of the strange events which which had just taken place.

"Another thing that rendered his imposture the easier," resumed Mr. Meredith, "was the fact of his arriving at about the time we expected you— By the way, Sydney," he broke off, suddenly, "how did it happen that you did not arrive at the time we expected you?"

"An unavoidable accident, which I shall explain later. You say this man is the very image of myself?"

"In every particular."

"Voice, too?"

"I cannot say as to that. There may be a trifling difference in the voice. My impression is that there *is* a slight difference, but I could not be expected to notice it under the circumstances."

"I think I understand it now," resumed Sydney, after some reflection. "I wonder, however, if it can be the same fellow. There was a chap in Paris who was said to be my double, and who made use of my credit to an alarming extent, and was only curtailed in his career by the fact that my resources were limited, and it did not take him long to use what little substance I possessed. I must admit that he afterward settled, however. When I tried to run the rascal down, I found that he had left Paris, and I could discover no further trace of him. I had no idea he was in the United States, and I am puzzled to understand how he should have known enough of my affairs to have succeeded in imposing himself upon Florence."

"He did, nevertheless. And that is the oddest part of it. He recalled incidents that occurred and bits of conversation that passed between you and her while travelling in Europe last summer, things which it

would appear no one but yourselves could have known."

"Indeed? This is most miraculous! Can you recall any of these reminiscences?"

"Let me see," reflected the old man. "There was one I remember where he spoke of your going up to the heights above Lucerne and looking off at the snow-capped Alps, and—"

"And she recognized that as a piece of our experience?" interrupted Sydney.

"Certainly."

"But, my dear sir, if you remember, I did not go to Switzerland with you. I left you at Baden-Baden and returned to Paris, as I was obliged to get back to my studies, while you went on to Aix-la-Chapelle, and from there to some of the Rhine towns, and thence to Switzerland."

"Such was your expressed intention, I remember. But you cannot have forgotten the fact that you came back from Paris before we left Baden-Baden and accompanied us on our journey to Switzerland?"

"I remember that I did nothing of the kind," retorted Sydney, firmly.

Meredith stared at him in amazement.

"What do you mean?" he inquired.

"Exactly what I say. I did not see you or Florence from the time we parted at Baden-Baden till your return to Paris just before sailing for America."

The old gentleman again stared at him in mute astonishment for some time, and then, without a word, took out his pocketbook, and from it extracted a card the exact counterpart of the one which the other man had sent in to him at the inn, and calling his companion's attention to a memorandum on the back of it, said:

"Perhaps you will recall the occasion upon which you gave me that, sir?"

Sydney took the card and, after examining it minutely, returned it with the remark:

"I never saw it before this moment, sir."

The old gentleman's face assumed a puzzled expression. He did not know what to make of the affair. Was the young man deliberately lying, or was he the possessor of the most remarkably treacherous memory in the world?

The memorandum in question was an "I O U" for a small loan from Mr. Meredith to Sydney Parkinson.

"This is most remarkable!" ejaculated the old gentleman at length. "I can make nothing of it. Either you have an astoundingly bad memory or else I have experienced a wonderful dream."

Sydney was silent, and his face wore a mystified expression. At length, however, it lighted up as with an inspiration, and he exclaimed:

"I believe I have discovered the solution of the mystery, Mr. Meredith."

"For heaven's sake, tell me what it is!" cried the old man.

"The fact that this rascal has been able to impose upon you this time renders it possible that he may have done so before."

"Eh?"

"The same person, whoever he is, who impersonated me at the hotel in Paris must have learned enough about me to palm himself off on you in a similar manner. He stopped at the same hotel in Paris as myself, and upon my credit, while I was away with you in Germany, and left the very day of my return. He, therefore, must have joined you shortly after I left you, and playing the *rôle* of Sydney Parkinson, accompanied you

upon the rest of your journey. If this is the party with whom we have to deal, Mr. Meredith, we have a contract on our hands."

The old gentleman groaned aloud.

"Heaven! That my daughter's fate should be in the hands of such a villain!" he cried, "If Providence wills that I should ever set eyes upon the wretch, I shall not be responsible for my actions!"

"If it is so ordained that I should meet him," interjected Sydney earnestly, "one of us must die!"

At that moment Meredith's eyes, in surveying the faces of the various occupants of the car, came in contact with a sight that gave him a start. It was the faces of the two men he had seen in the supper room at the wayside inn. The sight of these men in this place exercised a strange influence upon him, for he somehow associated them with the man who had robbed him of his daughter, and he was filled with indescribable consternation. After a little reflection, he turned to Sydney and said:

"I don't know but what we are pretty near a clue already."

"How? Where?" gasped the young man, glancing about the car and then at his companion's face, which he found to be very pale and excited. "Where is it?"

"Look!" muttered Meredith, pointing in the direction. "Do you see the two men in the next seat to the last on the right-hand side of this aisle?"

"The one with the gray hair and the other with the blond curls?"

"Yes."

"Well, what of them?"

"In my opinion they are in some way in league with the scoundrel who carried Florence off."

"What leads you to believe so?"

"They are strangers in the community we have just left—were never seen there before, so far as I know. They arrived about the same time that he did, and are now going away on the same train with ourselves."

There was so little in this upon which to found a supposition that the men had any connection with Florence's abductor or with the abduction, that Sydney was unable to refrain from laughing.

"I cannot see anything in all you have related," he said, "which could by any amount of twisting be construed as evidence or even suspicion that they have anything to do with our man."

"Perhaps not," assented the other, a little abashed. "Perhaps there *is* nothing in all this upon which to found a suspicion, but I judge more by the men's actions than anything else."

"Oh, that alters the case entirely. If their actions were such as to cause you to suspect them, then you are probably right in your theory. What were their actions?"

"Why, as soon as we entered the dining-room at the tavern last night they commenced staring at Florence, and never for an instant removed their eyes from her while we remained."

"A most excellent reason for supposing that they had nothing to do with this affair, I should say," smiled Sydney. "For if they had been mixed up with it, you may be sure they would have appeared to take no notice of her whatever."

This was a set-back for the old man, and he was far from pleased at having his fine theory upset so easily.

"At any rate," he retorted, a little crustily, "I still believe that they are the friends of this scamp and had something to do with helping him in the abduction."

"My dear sir, I do not see that he required any help —that is—any more than you yourself lent him."

"You do not understand me. Perhaps you do not choose to. There are other ways in which they might have assisted him besides in an open way. At all events, I shall see whether they had or not."

The old gentleman arose from his seat, and Sydney interposed:

"You aren't going to ask them?"

"That is exactly what I am going to do," replied Meredith, coldly.

Parkinson laughed.

"You will have your trouble for nothing, I can assure you, for if they are this fellow's confederates, you may be sure they will tell you nothing."

"I shall see for myself," retorted the old man, and away he went.

But as he approached them, the train ran into a station and stopped, and the two men hurried out on the car and jumped off. Meredith returned to his seat with a smile of triumph wreathing his face.

"Now what have you to say?" he demanded.

"Well?" laughed Sydney.

"The fact of their jumping off as soon as they saw me proves the correctness of my theory, doesn't it?"

CHAPTER V.

MORE MYSTERY.

"You may be right in your hypothesis, Mr. Meredith," admitted the artist, smiling, however, at the other's gravity. "But the fact of their getting off at this station signifies nothing. It may have been a mere coincidence. Whoever they are, though, we have the satisfaction of knowing that they are out of our way, and will give us no further trouble."

"I don't know about that," said the old man, apprehensively. "If they are the rascals I take them to be, this is only a dodge to throw us off the track, and they will turn up when we least expect them."

Sydney used all his arts to dispel his apprehensions, and in the course of the day succeeded in diverting his mind somewhat, but ever and anon he would revert to it again, and at such times would scan every part of the car and look out of the window in evident expectation of seeing the two men.

It was near nightfall when the train reached Jersey City, and our friends lost no time in getting across to the New York side of the river.

"Instead of going to a hotel, Mr. Meredith," suggested Sydney, when they reached Broadway, "suppose you come to my lodgings. They are by no means

palatial, but I imagine we can make ourselves comfortable there, and we can the better avoid the possibility of this fellow discovering our whereabouts, if he should take it into his head to do so. At least for a while."

"Just the thing," declared Meredith. "If we should go to a hotel and he should take a notion to look us up, he would have no trouble in doing so, and it is desirable that we should keep our presence in the city from him as long as possible, especially until we run upon a clue."

An old building in University Place, which was formerly a church, has, within a few years, been converted into an apartment house, and is occupied for the most part by the poorer class of artists as sleeping-rooms and studios. On the fourth floor of this building Sydney Parkinson had his living and work-rooms, consisting of two small and one fairly large apartment. There being no elevator, the two men were compelled to climb the four flights of stairs. As the artist led the way up he met the janitor coming down. The latter stopped and gazed at Sydney in evident astonishment. The artist wondered at the conduct of the janitor, who was ordinarily a very civil man, and should have had no trouble in recognizing his tenant, and concluded to question him touching his behavior.

"What is the matter, Judson?" he interrogated.

"Nothing, sir," replied the Janitor, "only I was just wondering how you managed to change your clothes and come back so soon, sir."

"What do you mean?" demanded the artist, in surprise.

"Why, sir, didn't you just go out this minute in a light suit?" queried the janitor.

"I did not, nor in any other kind of a suit."

The man indulged in that incredulous sort of a laugh that a subordinate is apt to do when he would like the

best in the world to tell you that you have lied, but dare not.

Under ordinary circumstances Sydney would have lost his temper, but at that moment the truth flashed upon him.

"No, you did not see *me* go out, Judson," he said, smiling, "but you probably saw a man who is my counterfeit."

Again the janitor laughed.

"Never mind," pursued the artist, coloring and growing a little nervous from very vexation. "I know that you think it could have been none other than myself. But tell me, how long has it been since he—that is, I—went out?"

Sydney did not realize how absurd this question must have sounded to one ignorant of the facts until the janitor again burst out in an uproarious guffaw, and he saw that it would be necessary to explain matters to the fellow if he desired to obtain any satisfactory information from him. He therefore entered into a detailed explanation of how his double had, at various times, imposed himself upon the public as the real Sydney Parkinson. He also explained that he had just returned to the city, and could not, therefore, have been in the house at the time at which the janitor imagined he saw him.

All of which only had the effect of partially convincing the man, but he nevertheless volunteered the information that the person whom he had mistaken for the artist had arrived about noon. That he had entered the studio with a key, remained for some time, and then went away. That he had called again a few minutes before Sydney's arrival, with two other men, but left almost immediately afterward.

"Did he say where he was going?" inquired Sydney.

"No sir."

"Did you notice what the two visitors were like?"

"Yes, sir, I couldn't help noticin' them," rejoined the janitor, and proceeded to describe them minutely.

"By Jove!" cried Sydney. "The very chaps we saw in the car. I wonder how they managed to get here ahead of us?"

But when he turned to the old gentleman, as he spoke, he found him ghastly white and trembling as with an ague. The artist understood the meaning of it. The superstitious old man believed there was something miraculous in the unaccountable appearance of the two men who had left the train a hundred miles from New York, being there ahead of those who remained on the train.

Sydney did not stop to discuss the matter with him then, however, but grasping his arm, assisted him up to the studio. There he sat, shaking his head dismally for a long time, and at length he murmured:

"There is some strange unearthliness about this whole affair—something that no human being will ever be able to unravel."

"Oh, no, my old friend. Do not talk like that," urged Sydney, in a soothing tone. "We shall soon unravel the whole business and bring that rascal to justice. As for the apparently supernatural about it, that is all imagination. It is simply a coincidence that another man happens to resemble me very closely, that is all."

"That is not the worst, my boy," groaned the old man. "I am not at all superstitious on that score, for I understand it to be a natural phenomenon. But please explain, if you can, how those two men whom we saw leave the train a hundred miles from the city reached here before we did."

The artist was a trifle puzzled to explain the mystery, but it would not do for him to admit the impossibility of a natural explanation of it, even if his materialism would have permitted him to believe that there was anything supernatural about the affair. Therefore he struggled manfully, and in his desperation succeeded beyond his expectation.

"It is a trifle mysterious, I admit," he began, "but," and here an inspiration came to his aid, "not beyond a rational solution. In my opinion the men never left the train. It would have been very easy, in case their design was to elude us, to step off the train and walk back and take a seat in another car of the same train."

"But, assuming that they came in on the same train, how could they reach here ahead of us?"

"There would have been no trouble about that. As you know, we took the elevated train at Park Place, rode up to Eighth Street, got off there and walked up to Tenth, two blocks, and across from Sixth Avenue to University Place, another two blocks, and another half block here. Now suppose they had taken a hack at the ferry and driven directly here? Why, they could easily have beaten us, and that is the time at which the janitor probably saw them."

"From the way he spoke, I should judge that it was much earlier," objected Meredith.

"I know," said Parkinson, determined to leave no ground for doubt on the old man's part. "But you must know that Judson has a very poor memory. But let us banish these childish fancies and get down to something practical. We must— Great Heaven!"

As Sydney had concluded his remarks, he had walked toward a picture upon which he had been at work, and, lighting the gas-jet that hung directly over it, glanced at his unfinished work.

"What is it?" asked Meredith, running over to where he stood gazing at the picture with a horrified expression.

"Look!" exclaimed the artist, pointing at the canvas.

"What is it?" again demanded the other, who, of course, could see nothing unusual.

"He has been at work upon my picture!" muttered Sydney."

"Who?"

"My—my double!" gasped the artist.

"And spoiled it?"

"Spoiled it? No! Done it as well as I could have myself; and the most remarkable thing about it, he has employed my own method, a thing that no American artist ever did before. No living man could have done that."

"What!" cried the old man in astonishment, and then burst into a boisterous laugh. "I thought you did not believe in such things."

The artist was dismayed. He did not actually mean that he believed the work had been done by a spirit, but had merely uttered it in a fit of absent-mindedness. He had exhibited a weakness in the other's eyes which it would take a tedious time to explain away, and he did not feel inclined to take the trouble just then. In fact, he was nettled at the old gentleman for catching him, and angry with himself for making the slip; so, turning abruptly from the picture, he said, in a brusque tone:

"Come, let us go. We have no time to waste. We must find whether that fellow has really been here or not, and, if possible, where he has gone to at present."

With that he strode out of the studio, and was followed by Mr. Meredith. When they were about half

way down the first flight of stairs, the artist paused, and turning to his companion, said :

"There is one thing I shall do before leaving here, and that is to put an extra lock on that door, so that the fellow cannot get in, even if he has a key to the regular lock."

He returned to the studio, and procuring a heavy padlock, which happened to be in the studio, placed it through a clasp and staple on the outside of the door, and locked it.

"There," he muttered, "that will put a check upon his freedom with my apartments, I imagine."

When Sydney at length reached the street, he was in a quandary which way to proceed, and in his dilemma turned abstractedly into a cigar store near at hand and called for a cigar. He knew the dealer well and addressed him familiarly, after which the latter remarked:

"You must be doing a good deal of smoking, this evening, Parkinson, or have you some kind friends to help you out ?"

"Friends !" echoed Sydney, absently.

"But you don't mean to say you have used the entire box you got here half an hour ago?" questioned the dealer in astonishment.

"Certainly. Why not ?"

"It is no business of mine, of course, if you can afford it, old fellow ; but I thought you were going to the theatre."

Here appeared to be a clue, and the artist pricked his ears. But it would require some tact to get at the unsuspecting dealer without letting him into the secret of his double. After a moment's reflection, however, he hit upon a plan.

"The fact is, Parker," he began, "I 'm so deuced absent-minded of late that I don't remember what I

say five minutes after I have said it, half the time. Did I say I was going to the theatre?"

"You certainly did, and, moreover, boasted that you were going to take the handsomest girl in town."

"The deuce you say! I didn't say anything about this angel being my wife, did I?"

"Yes," replied the cigar man, laughing. "At least, you led me to infer as much; but, of course, I knew you were joking."

"I should hope so. But what theatre did I say I was going to? Do you remember?"

"Yes, you said you were going to the Academy of Music. But, honor bright, you aren't giving me a guy about your not remembering anything about this?"

"I hope I may die if I do!" rejoined Sydney. "But I must be going, or that beautiful girl will get tired of waiting."

CHAPTER VI.

A GLIMPSE OF THE GAME.

So absorbed had Sydney been in this mysterious affair that he had forgotten, temporarily, the very existence of the old gentleman until he returned to the street again after leaving the cigar store.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Meredith," he said, apologetically. "I got so absorbed in what that fellow was telling me about our man that I fear I have neglected you. Have a cigar?"

"Thanks," responded Meredith, taking the proffered cigar. "You need apologize for nothing you do under the stress of the present distracting affair, for we are both liable to forget civility and everything else. But what was the fellow to whom you allude saying?"

"He says that my double was in the cigar store not more than half an hour ago and bought a box of cigars. He also says that the fellow signified his intention of going to the theatre, and, inasmuch as he spoke of accompanying a beautiful young lady, he doubtless alluded to Florence."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the old man, enthusiastically. "Did you learn what theatre he was going to?"

"Yes, that is the best of it. He said he was going to the Academy of Music, so the best thing we can do is to go there, and the chances are we shall see the scoundrel."

"The very thing!" cried Meredith, rapturously. "This is better luck than we anticipated."

"It certainly is," rejoined the artist, who was also in high spirits. "Come, let us get dinner somewhere and then go to the theatre."

Walking across to Broadway, they stopped at the St. Denis and dined, and then on up that thoroughfare to Fourteenth Street, the two friends were soon at the Academy of Music. They were a little late, but that served their purpose all the better, as they had no crowd to contend with. Sydney procured seats in one of the proscenium boxes, in order that he might have a good view of the audience, and, having rented a pair of opera-glasses, they began the work of scanning the faces of the audience. Tier after tier was slowly and carefully swept with the lorgnettes, and every face studied in turn with the severest scrutiny. And, not satisfied with one search, they went over the field a second, a third, a dozen times, but all to no purpose. Many faces had appeared at first glance to resemble the man they were after, and more than one woman had impressed them at first glimpse as bearing a resemblance to Florence, but upon closer scrutiny they invariably discovered that it was not she.

Thus the search was kept up during the whole performance, so that what went on upon the stage was entirely lost to them. Neither spoke for a long time, each being too deeply engrossed in the one object of finding some trace of either Florence or the man who had so basely deceived her. At length, however, the old gentleman muttered in a disheartened tone:

"It is no use, my boy, they are not here."

"I have come to the same conclusion," answered Sydney, despondently. "The fellow either did not come, as he said he intended, or, having come, caught

sight of us as we entered, and made his escape before we had a chance to see him."

"We may as well go, I presume," suggested Meredith. "I see no use in remaining here any longer."

"We may as well sit the performance out now, as there is but one more act."

"I could not have told you as much as that," said the old gentleman, smiling grimly, "for I haven't taken the slightest notice of the play."

"Nevertheless, there may be something gained by staying," urged the artist. "We may be able to see our man—in the event of our having overlooked him—as the crowd disperses."

The old gentleman offered no further objection, and silently submitted to the ordeal of sitting through the remainder of the play with the patience of a martyr, although his mind was still too much absorbed in other matters to permit him to take the least interest in what was passing before his eyes.

At length the curtain fell, and the audience began to surge for the door; but Sydney and his companion remained in their seats and focused their glasses upon the dispersing throng. But still to no purpose. The audience melted away, and no glimpse had our friends had of their man, and they, too, arose to depart. All hope had been abandoned of seeing him in that place, and they did not take the trouble to watch for him any longer.

Overtaking the heaving, surging crowd ere they got beyond the lobby, the artist and his friend began the task of elbowing their way through. They had gone but a little way, however, when Sydney felt a violent clutch of his arm. He turned, and saw the old gentleman pointing toward the door. The artist looked in the direction, and was surprised to behold the same

two men whom he had seen on the train, just passing out of the door. He was fired with an irresistible desire to get at them, and used such heroic efforts that he soon succeeded in reaching the door, which he did in time to see the men enter a hack at the curb, not twenty feet away.

Without pausing to consider the matter, Sydney was on the point of dashing out to the hack, with the intention of opening the door and demanding the name and address of the two men, when a second clutch at his arm caused him to stop, and turning again, beheld the old man pointing toward another person, who was just turning the corner. One glance was sufficient to tell him who it was. It was Sydney Parkinson's double.

Every other thought instantly vanished from Sydney's mind. His whole soul was fired with the one idea of overtaking this man, who had been the cause of so much misery; who had embittered his life, in fact; and, tearing away from his companion's grasp, he dashed heedlessly through the surging throng in the direction in which the fellow had vanished. A dozen rapid strides brought him to the corner of the building around which the man had disappeared, and the crowd here was less dense.

Sydney paused and cast his eyes about. He had not to look long, for not twenty paces away he beheld the object of his search, walking leisurely off at an easy gait, swinging his cane with the air of one who had not a care in the world. His nonchalance stung Sydney to the soul and infuriated him beyond endurance, and he made a few rapid strides and stood at his side. Sydney touched the man on the arm, when the latter paused and turned upon the artist with an inquiring glance, mingled with scorn.

"Well?" was the cool interrogation.

"I wish to know your name, sir," ejaculated Sydney, sharply.

The fellow eyed him from head to foot with a contemptuous scowl, and at length demanded:

"By what law, human or divine, am I commanded to give you my name, sir?"

Sydney realized that he had made a mistake in approaching the man in this spirit, and decided to exercise a little more tact. Modifying his tone somewhat, he rejoined:

"There is no law beyond that of courtesy, I believe, sir, and my desire to make your acquaintance. I believe we have met frequently before, on the other side of the water."

With that Sydney handed him his card. The gentleman took the card and glanced at it with the same *sang-froid* that he might have done at one which he had never seen before. This astonished and irritated the artist, for, knowing that his double had used the same card more than once, he expected to see him blush at the very least, if not exhibit a little agitation. But, to his astonishment, he did neither, but coolly putting the card away in his pocket, as coolly took forth a card-case and handed Sydney one of his own cards. Sydney glanced at it eagerly, and saw that it read—

BERNARD H. LIVINGSTONE.

Parkinson was taken aback somewhat by the other's coolness, but was determined not to give up the fight at once.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I believe you do not always use this card, do you?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Livingstone, coolly.

"For example, when you stopped at the inn near Jonesboro and sent your card in to Mr. Meredith and his daughter. You haven't forgotten that occurrence, I trust? You did not use this card upon that occasion."

"You speak in riddles, sir," sneered the other. "I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about."

"Do you mean to say that you do not remember the circumstance to which I have alluded?" uttered Sydney, earnestly.

"I do," was the frigid response.

"Perhaps, then, you have forgotten the other occurrence of going across the bridge and being married to Miss Meredith, under the name of Sydney Parkinson?"

"I have no such recollection," replied Livingstone, without a quaver in his voice.

This utter disregard for truth struck the artist dumb for a moment, and he could do nothing but stare at the other with speechless amazement. But soon the recollection of Livingstone's villainy crowded upon him, and his rage arose proportionately.

Approaching a little nearer and looking the fellow full in the eye, he began:

"Enough, sir, of your equivocation, or, to call it by its right name, lying. I have heard quite enough of it. Now tell me, if you value your life, where is Florence?"

Instead of any exhibition of anger at this insult, as Sydney expected, Livingstone merely shrugged his shoulders and laughed. This wrought the artist up to a frenzy, and shaking his fist in the other's face, repeated the demand more vehemently than before:

"Where is Florence, sir? Tell me, or, by Heaven, I 'll kill you!"

This appeared to strike home, for Livingstone turned pale, and, stepping back a pace and scowling darkly, said:

"Do you refer to my wife?"

"I refer to the lady whom you married under the falsest and basest of pretenses—that of masquerading under the name and character of a gentleman—and who, if she knew your true character, would spurn you from her as she would a serpent!"

This outburst appeared to amuse the fellow, for he broke out into a fit of laughter.

The fiery temper of the artist could brook this insolence no longer. This last insult was too much. Springing at his impersonator, the artist attempted to clutch his throat, but the latter was too quick for him and eluded his grasp. He sprang back, swung his heavy cane, and, before the artist had time to dodge the blow, the cane crashed down upon his head. Sydney grew blind and dizzy, reeled for an instant, and then fell headlong into the gutter.

When he returned to consciousness he found himself in his room, and Mr. Meredith bending over him. The night had passed and a new day had dawned, but the old gentleman had never left him for an instant, after having him carried in and laid upon his couch. A physician had been called and his wound dressed, and from that forward Mr. Meredith had been his only nurse.

"How did it happen?" were the old man's first words when he found his patient able to talk.

"That villain did it," replied Sydney, in a feeble voice. "He struck me with his cane."

"I was afraid that would be the result, if nothing

worse, when I saw you dart after him. But tell me: Did you find out anything about where Florence is?"

"Yes, and no. I learned that she is with him, but failed to discover where he is. Never mind, though, my old friend; we will run the scoundrel down yet, and restore our precious one."

"I hope so," sighed the old man in a tone that exhibited more despair than hope. "But you must not excite yourself, my boy. You will have use for all your strength before we are through with this business."

"Don't worry about me, my old friend. I am as strong as ever, and, barring a slight pain in my head, as well. I shall soon be able to start upon our life-mission again."

Meredith was silent for some time, and then ventured in a tentative tone:

"Don't you think we had better put this matter into the hands of the police, Sydney?"

The artist reflected for a long time, and at length answered:

"No, I think not. You see, we really, so far as we know, have no case against the fellow."

"No case!" cried the old man in a shrill voice. "No case! What do you call the abducting of a young and helpless woman? I am surprised to hear you say that we have no case against him!"

"You forget that he is married to her, Mr. Meredith," rejoined Sydney, calmly; "legally married; not only with her own consent, but with yours."

"But under false pretenses—under a false name and false character."

"Granted. But suppose he was sharp enough to have given the minister his right name? I do not know that he did such a thing, but it would be only

consistent with his shrewdness. And then suppose, after he and Florence had started upon their journey, he had taken it into his head to be frank and told her his real name, and she concluded to forgive him and become reconciled to her lot? What sort of a case would we have, even if we caught him?"

The old man was stunned by the suggestion. He had never thought of those possibilities before. But, after a little reflection, his inmost soul rebelled against it.

"You are wrong, my boy!" he cried vehemently. "Even if the rascal had this forethought, and afterward the frankness to confess who he was, Florence is too loyal to have forgiven him. No, sir, she would never do it in this world, my boy, depend upon it."

"I should be loath to believe she would. But listen. As we know, this man travelled with you through Germany and Switzerland, and I infer that Florence treated him with the same tenderness that she did myself. She suspected nothing then, and must have learned to love him. Now, if she could love the man as Sydney Parkinson, what is to hinder her from learning to love him as Bernard Livingstone?"

"Bernard Livingstone?" gasped the old man, jumping to his feet.

"That is the fellow's name," explained Sydney.

"Heavens! That was the name of the boy whose father killed his brother on Brothers Bridge."

CHAPTER VII.

REBELLION.

So far from regaining confidence, Florence became more nervous than ever when she found herself alone with her newly made husband. Instead of a returning affection for him who was to be her life-companion, every additional moment in his society only strengthened her dislike for and distrust of him, until she soon came to be unable to look at him or endure his contact without a shudder.

The acute man of the world was not long in seeing the girl's involuntary distrust of him, and although he exercised his utmost arts to break down the barrier that was gradually rearing itself between them for a long time, he at length lost his patience and determined to change his tactics.

"Florence," he began in a cold, practical tone, at last, "I demand to know once for all the cause of all this coldness and indifference. I cannot understand it coming from you, who, less than one year ago, were so affectionate. Remember that you are my wife, and I have a right to expect a reciprocation of my affection. If you had any objection to marrying me after our rather long betrothal, you should have said so before we went to the altar. I offered you the privilege then, and as you did not choose to take it, the fault is your own."

This practical statement did not, strange to say, cause Florence to break down or in any other sense exhibit weakness. On the contrary, it fortified her for the declaration she herself desired to make, and which she could never have mustered courage to bring about had he not spoken as he did.

"Yes," she began, taking up the last part of his remarks first, "I should have spoken then. And my only excuse for not doing so is my weakness. God knows I desired to speak, and tried with all the energy of my being to pluck up courage to do so, but my strength failed at the vital moment. When you ask me to explain the cause of my indifference, you ask an impossibility. I cannot explain it. I only know that I do not, cannot feel toward you as I know a wife should feel toward a husband. I only know that I do not, cannot love you, and when you demand a reciprocation of your affection, you also demand an impossibility, for the reason I have just stated."

Her words had been as practical and devoid of feeling as his own, but they had a different effect upon him from what his had had upon her. He became greatly agitated and lost his usual power of eloquence. She could not have given him a greater shock if she had dashed a pail of cold water over him. He was silent for some seconds, during which he appeared to be undergoing the most excruciating torture. At length he spoke, in a low, tremulous voice, which showed how deeply her words had wounded him:

"You have forgotten, then, our mutual vows of one year ago? You have forgotten the delicious moments we passed together at that time? At least they were delicious to me, and you then professed that they were so to you. You have forgotten all this in so short a time?"

"No, Sydney," she replied, with more feeling than she had yet exhibited, "I have forgotten none of this, and I only wonder, feeling as I do now, how I could have loved you as I then did, or that, having loved you as I certainly did then, my heart should have undergone such a change. I only know that it has done so, and I can no more prevent it or explain the cause than I can fly."

"Perhaps you will permit me to explain it for you, then?"

She looked up in alarm.

"Yes, you needn't start," he went on, in a sterner voice, interpreting her look as an acknowledgment of what he was about to accuse her. "I am more thoroughly satisfied now than ever. You do not love me, for the reason that you do love my—"

But he checked himself, colored and lapsed into silence.

"Why, what do you mean?" she demanded, with still greater alarm.

"Nothing," was the cold response.

She was silent, and bit her lip from vexation.

"If," she ventured at last in a tremulous voice, "you mean to insinuate that my affections have been bestowed in another direction, you wrong me; cruelly, shamefully wrong me, Sydney! You are the only man upon whom I ever bestowed the least affection. You are, indeed, the first and only one with whom I ever became sufficiently intimate to speak on the subject of love."

He looked at her inquiringly, and would have given worlds to have known whether she was speaking the truth—that is, so far as she knew.

"Are you quite sure of that?" he finally questioned.

"Sure of it?" and she looked up at him with a hurt expression. "Why, how can you ask such a question?

I was but sixteen when we went abroad, and had never kept company with a gentleman in my life, and we had travelled two years before I met you at Paris. And the day we drove out to the Cours de Bade, near Baden-Baden, and you made a declaration of your love, was the first time that any man had ever spoken on the subject to me."

"The day *we* drove out to the race track?"

"Yes," she responded, as he came to a sudden pause. "You cannot have forgotten that?"

"Oh, no, I have not forgotten it," he answered quickly, although his confusion would have shown anybody conversant with all the facts that it was the first time he had ever heard of the affair. "Oh, no, I cannot forget that," he repeated. And her allusion to the subject proved to him that at least she suspected nothing of the existence of the double thus far, and his mind was somewhat set at ease by the discovery. "But you professed to reciprocate my affection at that time."

She looked up quickly, and when he turned his own eyes upon her face, he saw that it wore an expression of the utmost astonishment.

"Why, I don't see how you can say that," she uttered. "I certainly said nothing to lead you to that belief. On the contrary, I told you then that your avowal was so sudden and unexpected that it had taken me by surprise."

"Yes, I know you said that," he answered quickly, seeing that he had made a serious blunder. "But—but—I inferred that—"

"You *must* remember," she interrupted, "that it was nearly a week afterward, when we were returning from a visit to the Kursaal, and you renewed your protestations, that I finally confessed that your affection was reciprocated."

"YOU CERTAINLY HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN THAT," SHE CRIED.—*See Page 67.*

"So it was! So it was!" he coincided, with suspicious promptness. "That was the day, wasn't it," he ventured, feeling his way, "that I left you to return to Paris?"

"Yes, you left that same evening."

"I knew it was the same day." And then inwardly he exclaimed: "Thank goodness, I hit the mark for once!—Well, you did actually love me then?" he resumed aloud.

"Yes, sincerely," she confessed, blushing.

"And when I returned from Paris, a few days later, contrary to your own and my expectations, you still appeared to entertain the same regard for me?"

"Which I did."

"You saw no change in me then, and had undergone no change yourself?"

"No."

"And during all our wanderings for the next month you were contented and happy in my society?"

"I certainly was. But there were strange lapses of memory on your part once in awhile that caused me to wonder, and I sometimes imagined that your mind was wandering."

"Indeed!" and he assumed an air of astonishment which she, in her innocence, mistook for genuine. "I do not recall them, dear. What, for instance, did I appear to forget?"

"Well, once, while in Switzerland, when I alluded to some things which had passed between us while in Germany, you seemed to have forgotten all about them."

"My wretched memory," he muttered. "And now to show you what a miserable memory I have at times I must confess that I have even forgotten what particular circumstance I had forgotten at that time."

"Why, you *must* remember *that*," she said, blushing violently.

"For the life of me, darling, I cannot," he affirmed. "Please tell me just one."

"Well, it was when we were walking over the bridge across the Reuss at Lucerne. We had stopped to gaze down into the swift stream, when you put your arm around me and—and—kissed me." Here she grew very red. "And you declared that it was our first kiss."

"As it was—that is—"

"What?"

"That is," he faltered, seeing that he was about to commit another blunder, "the first one *there*."

"Oh!"

"I thought I had explained *that*."

"No, you did *not* explain, and that was one of the occasions on which I was led to believe that either your mind was inclined to wander, or that—"

"I was inconstant, eh?" he laughed, catching at the opportunity. "Now, now, my little girl, how could you ever get that foolish idea into your head?"

"It seemed so strange that you should have forgotten such things, that you could not blame me for suspecting something wrong," she returned, pouting.

"My little Florence should have remembered that I was studying very hard at that time, and—forgive me for admitting it—my mind was absorbed with my art more than anything else. I know my Florence can forgive me for this, as I felt that her happiness depended upon my success, and my devotion to my studies was only another form of devotion to her."

The smile she bestowed upon him showed him that his bit of unction had not been spent in vain.

"But," she persisted, as if determined to humble

him still more, "that wasn't as bad as your conduct when we reached Paris."

"For goodness' sake, what was I guilty of there?" he exclaimed, with a well-feigned look of horror. "You may as well tell me all of it at once, so that I may sue for absolution of all my sins while I am about it."

"You certainly have not forgotten that," she cried, with genuine astonishment, "for I gave you such a scolding then that I was sure you would remember it!"

"Just my wretched memory!" he again grumbled. "As a matter of fact, it has all passed out of my mind. You see, my studies—"

"Don't you remember that on rejoining us at the hotel, after being absent but a few hours, you came in and shook papa's and mamma's hands, and then mine, as though you hadn't seen any of us for a year, and asked when we had returned to Paris, and if we had had a pleasant journey?"

"Great Scott! Did I ask that?" he exclaimed, affecting to be greatly astonished.

"You certainly did, and I shall never forget the look of surprise on papa's and mamma's faces, nor can I forget my own astonishment. But papa, who is very charitable, tried to smooth the matter over with mamma and me afterward by saying that he supposed you had met some of your artist friends and had taken a little too much."

"Which, indeed, was the truth, dear," interjected Sydney (as we must still call him for the present), only too eager to find a way out of the dilemma. "But I pledge my word that it shall never occur again."

"This, then, was the secret of your absent-mindedness?"

"Not always, dear," replied he, in a tone of abject penitence. "My abstraction in my studies, as I said,

had most to do with it; still, I must confess that there were times when your father's theory would have been the correct one. But now, my dear girl, all this is past, and you will find me a different man in the future."

All this had its effect upon the susceptible girl, who, notwithstanding her inexplicable repugnance to the man, could not be insensible to the genuineness of his devotion. She had experienced a strange sensation at the mention of the word "wife," which had caused her to involuntarily shrink from him, but she resolved to begin the fight against her natural inclinations from that moment, and, if she could not succeed in restoring the affection she had once borne him, at least to accept with unflinching resignation her unhappy lot and to strive with her utmost strength to reciprocate his affection—in appearance, if no more.

He was not slow to discover the change which had come over her, and determined to take advantage of it to strengthen his own case.

"It was selfish—cruelly selfish in me to ask you to love me, Florence," he said, in the tenderest manner "when I should have seen that it was no fault of yours that your affection had cooled. I should have accepted my fate with a manlier fortitude, and striven to win your sympathy, if no more. And it was doubly selfish and cruel to intimate that your affection had been bestowed elsewhere, when I knew my little girl's heart too well to have allowed me to harbor such a thought for an instant. But the crowning bit of selfishness was in failing to see your repugnance to our union before it was too late, and to have assured your happiness by releasing you then and there. It would have broken my heart, but it was my simple duty, for my happiness is nothing to yours, Florence."

There was a note of such hopeless sadness in his

words, such an obvious spirit of voluntary self-sacrifice, that the girl was deeply touched. She could not help feeling that she was guilty of a great wrong ; that she was unnecessarily martyring a noble, generous being, who was not only worthy of her but who was greatly her superior in many respects. And with the thought came the impulse that she had misinterpreted her own heart all this time, and that, after all, she did love him, as truly and devotedly as she had ever done. The next moment she buried her face in his bosom, burst into tears, and cried:

"Oh, Sydney, I do love you with all my heart! Will you—can you forgive your weak little girl?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEFEAT.

Sydney folded the penitent girl to his bosom, and for a long time they remained silently entwined in each other's embrace. At this hour of the night the coach was silent, and most of the passengers, who, like themselves, had taken the parlor-car, had twisted themselves into such attitudes as their narrow limits would permit, and were snoring lustily. Therefore nobody paid the slightest attention to the actions of anybody else, and the young couple could enjoy their honeymoon unmolested. After a long and delicious silence, Sydney spoke:

"You have made me very happy, Florence," he said. "Happier than I ever hoped to be, after the reception you gave me at the inn."

"Oh, Sydney!" she protested, "why do you remind me of my weakness? Why cannot we forget that unpleasant affair?"

"So we will, dear," he answered, quickly. "Forgive me for alluding to it. But you have made me so happy within the last hour that I could not help contrasting it with the wretchedness into which I had fallen a few hours before. But, as you say, we shall forget that any such occurrence ever took place, and date our life from this moment."

"Shall we not sometimes recall the moments we spent together on the continent?" she objected.

"Oh, certainly, we shall not forget that," he answered. "But we shall bury every unpleasant little incident out of sight forever."

"And that will not be hard," she murmured, "for they have been few—eh, Sydney, dear?"

"Yes, darling, very few, thank goodness."

Oh, that the happiness and success we promise ourselves could be as easily fulfilled as they are conceived! How little do we know, as we tread the sun-kissed and rose-embowered pathway of Hope, how soon we may step over the precipice and find ourselves engulfed in the abyss of Despair!

As the day broke, cloudless and glorious, and when these two young travellers, starting upon life's hopeful voyage, looked out of the car window upon the sweet autumnal landscape, the world appeared more beautiful than it had ever appeared before. There was not a tint in the red and brown and russet scene or a scent that wafted up from the meadows and woodlands that did not harmonize with their happy hearts.

At length, about nine o'clock, the train rolled into the depot at Jersey City, and then came a pandemonium of noise and bustle, as the throng surged toward the ferries, and struggled past another crowd which was surging toward the outgoing trains. And there was a confusion of baggage-laden trucks, bawling porters, screeching newsboys and yelling train-dispatchers that made Florence's brain reel as she was half dragged through the swaying, struggling crowd on her husband's arm. Finally she found herself on the ferry-boat, where she seemed to have got by some chance, as she could not imagine where she was going until she arrived in the "Women's Cabin."

And there was something very unreal about it all. She had fallen into a sweet delirium at the moment of her discovery that she loved—or thought she loved—her husband, and she dared not allow her mind to stray away into the real, palpable world, lest she should awake to that hateful state of distrust again. Nor did she awake from her dream when she found herself, a little later, alone with him, huddled into the narrow limits of a hack, and felt herself jerked and jolted along over the rough streets. They were both too happy or too much absorbed in reflection to converse much on the way, and the first thing Florence knew the hack stopped, and Sydney alighted and helped her to the sidewalk; and then, as he left her standing while he looked after having her trunk carried in, she took occasion to look about her. She saw that she was in a narrow, deserted street of tall houses, the solemn, inhospitable brown fronts of which gave her a shiver, and the poor girl could not help contrasting her own rural home, with its limitless expanse of greensward blending away to the horizon or woodland, with the cramped habitations she saw here. Already she began to experience a cramped sensation herself, as if she could never find room here to stretch her limbs, or air enough to fill her lungs.

But her reverie was soon broken in upon by Sydney, who came and took her by the arm with the gentle admonition:

"Come, dear, let us go in."

Florence allowed herself to be ushered into the hallway, which, she could not avoid noticing, was redolent with the smell of onions and various other articles of cookery, and she was not favorably impressed with her introduction to her new home.

Sydney at once began the ascent of a not very tidy

stairway, and she mechanically followed, wondering where she was going. Beyond the vague allusion to a "cozy little flat," which her husband had made on their way to the railway station the night before, he had told her nothing concerning the sort of home he was bringing her to, and her curiosity, coupled with a sort of foreboding, increased with each additional flight of stairs she toiled up. And by the time they reached the fourth floor, and he turned, with a smile, which she could barely discern in the dark passage, and intimated that they had at last arrived at their destination, her spirits had sunk very low.

"You won't find a palace here, dear," he observed, in a gentle voice; "but I imagine we can be as happy as we would in a larger place."

Florence was too despondent by this time to offer any response, and her husband proceeded to unlock the door. When she got inside, however, her spirits arose somewhat, for she found all that Sydney had promised —a cozy little flat. Particularly was the designation "little" appropriate, for never were rooms designed for living beings to inhabit more economical in dimensions. The place was wonderfully suggestive of a doll-house, There were six little rooms "and bath" in all, and the whole of them would scarcely have made her own single room at home. But they were tidy and neatly furnished, only there was an unpleasant odor of varnish and upholstering, and a general sheen and sharp-cornered newness about everything that was absolutely chilling.

"What does my little wife think of it?" inquired Sydney, after they had looked the flat over. "Isn't it cozy?"

"Yes," she replied, feebly, "it's cozy, but it seems as though we should have to stand up all the time for fear of crowding each other."

Sydney roared.

"You allude to the snugness of the rooms? Well, I'll admit that there is hardly room to muster a regiment, my dear, but quite enough for our simple needs; don't you think so?"

"But," she went on, looking about wonderingly, "where are we to sleep?"

Again her husband laughed. And then stepping up to a piece of furniture which looked for all the world like a chiffonier, and, with an adroit movement, caused the front to drop down, Florence was for the first time initiated into the mysteries of the folding-bed.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Does everybody in New York fold up the furniture in the day time?"

"Not all of them," he laughed, "but a good many of the poorer ones do."

Pretty soon the cook, who was also maid-of-all-work, came in to announce breakfast, and, after making their toilets, our young couple sat down to their first meal in their new home. There was nothing very appetizing and Florence could eat but little, although she strove to appear cheerful; but in spite of her efforts she was compelled to let Sydney do all the talking. As soon as the rather short meal was at an end, Sydney arose and said:

"Now, my dear, I must go to the studio, for, as I told you, every minute is precious with me until I have completed my picture. As you had no sleep last night, you had better retire and have a good rest against my return, and to-night we will go to the theatre."

With that he kissed her and hurried away.

But Livingstone had scarcely reached the street when a strange sensation came over him. Could he have analyzed it, he would have recognized it as remorse.

"What have I done?" he asked himself, as he paused. "I have inveigled an innocent girl into marrying me under false pretenses. True, the marriage is valid which was intended to be a farce, and thus far I have acted honorably—more honorably than if the joke had been carried out. Again, although a wife, she is still the sweet, unsullied flower I found her. On the other hand, I have deceived her in palming myself off on her for another man. But love is to be blamed for this. Her beautiful face and shining soul are responsible for my allowing what had been intended as a prank on the one hand and vengeance on the other to become a serious matter all round. If any one had told me in the beginning that it would end by my falling heels over head in love with the little minx, I should have laughed at him. So much for playing with edged tools. But what shall I do? I should go back and make a clean breast of it—confess everything and ask her forgiveness. But would she forgive me? That is the question. I do not believe she would. Her love, as it is, is a sort of artificial affair, like a stage fire, fed by a slender faith, which is also artificial, so that the flame will expire the instant the puny fuel is shut off."

After a good deal of reflection, which he indulged in as he paced to and fro, he arrived at this conclusion:

"No, I won't go back now. It would be cruel to break in upon her happiness so soon, for one thing. Besides, she is fatigued and less able to endure the shock than she will be after a good sleep. Meanwhile, I have left my desk open with all my papers, so that, if she possesses an iota of the curiosity said to be characteristic of women, she will know pretty much all about me against my return. So there will be that much that I won't have to explain. This is what I

shall do: I shall give her the day to it. She 'll have to have her little cry, of course, and when I return this evening, it will be as the prodigal son—or husband, rather. In the meantime, I must seek my friends, and between us devise some new mode of harassing that double of mine."

Left to herself, there was nothing farther from Florence's mind than sleep for that day. Everything was so strange, so new, so unsympathetic, it seemed, that she was soon terribly homesick and despondent. Nor did time serve to improve her condition. As the day wore on, she grew more and more wretched. The old feeling of distrust came over her again, after a time, and she once more realized that she did not love her husband. In the midst of her desolation, she opened her trunk and took therefrom a photograph. Throwing herself upon a divan near the window, she examined the picture. The first glance gave her a start, and an icy pang went to her heart. It was not the picture of her husband! Her heart told her this, although her eyes told her it was the likeness of Sydney Parkinson. Yes, the face was undoubtedly the same, but there appeared to be something back of this which was wanting in the man she had just wed. Poor Florence was bewildered, horrified, frightened, and in her agony she began to believe she was losing her reason. What could it all mean? She was sure now that she entertained no affection for the man who had just left her; and as she sat gazing at the picture, and she felt her heart going out toward it, or the subject of it rather, she felt that she hated and loathed her husband.

And yet, she told herself, she loved the subject of the picture, and the subject of the picture she believed to be the same man whom she had wed.

Oh, what could be the meaning of it? There was some terrible mystery, she felt, but she could not divine what it was. The girl grew desperate, and as she arose and paced the floor her repugnance for her husband grew so strong that she at length felt that she could not endure to meet him again. But what should she do? Where could she go?

During all this time she had never for an instant suspected the truth—the real cause of her unaccountable abhorrence of the man whom she had striven so hard during the last few hours to love. And then there was something coming over her. She did not understand what it was. She would have scorned to call it suspicion. Perhaps she would have preferred to have called it curiosity. Whatever it was, however, it impelled her, without her volition, to do something she would have scorned to do at any other time of her innocent life.

Florence went to her husband's secretary, and, finding it unlocked, began to look over some of his papers. She found a number of letters, but, to her perplexity, they were all addressed, not to "Sydney Parkinson," but to "Bernard H. Livingstone!" Who was Bernard Livingstone? she asked herself. It could not be her husband. And yet how came all these letters superscribed with that name in his secretary? And why did she find none addressed to Sydney Parkinson?

Perhaps she would have confessed to a shadow of suspicion now; still, she would be just. She would give him the benefit of a thorough investigation before pronouncing judgment. She sought farther. Still no letter or other document bearing the name by which she had known him was to be found. At length she found an envelope addressed to another person. It contained a letter, and as it was still unsealed, her hus-

band had evidently written it and forgotten to post it. Should she extract the letter and peruse its contents? Would this be right? she mused. Why not? The envelope was not sealed; besides, as she was his wife, she had a right to know his affairs. Fortified with this excuse as a balm for her conscience, Florence quickly drew forth the letter. But she did not read it at once. Glancing at the signature, she saw that it was that of Bernard Livingstone, and then, without examining the letter farther, she returned to her trunk and took therefrom a package of letters written by Sydney Parkinson. Opening one of these, she carefully compared the writing with that of the letter she had found in the secretary. It wanted but a glance to convince her that they were not written by the same hand. But this had only the effect of deepening the mystery, and she seated herself by the window and proceeded coolly to peruse the letter she had taken from the secretary. It was as follows:

"— East Eighty-first Street,
New York, Oct. 15, 18—.

"Dear Carroll: I start West to-morrow morning, for the purpose of making the final test. If I succeed this time as well as on the previous occasions, I should, by all justice, be declared the winner. At any rate, I will be the winner in one sense. You may meet me at the depot, and we will go together; and I write Antonio simultaneously with this, that he may also be present and see that everything is carried out according to agreement. You have no reason to complain with regard to the other performances, and I trust you will have as little with regard to the present one.

"I shall leave the Jersey City depot at 9:15. Be on hand promptly. Sincerely your friend,

"B. H. Livingstone."

The letter conveyed very little intelligence to the girl, for the reason that she had not the slightest idea

of who B. H. Livingstone or either of the other persons alluded to in the epistle was. Nevertheless, she was impressed with the notion that there was some wicked mystery connected with it, and, moreover, suspecting that her husband's real name was Livingstone, she did not doubt but that he was in some way concerned in it. She was not greatly affected by the discovery. Indeed, she was somewhat disappointed that she had found nothing worse. But the conclusion that she could not endure to meet him again, vaguely shadowed before, had become a substantial fact now. She calmly placed the letter in the envelope again and restored it to its place in the secretary. She then as calmly began preparations for flight.

Attiring herself in a plain walking-dress and putting a few necessary articles in a hand-satchel, she stepped into the kitchen and informed the servant that she was going out. She did not say when she would be back, but avoided saying anything about going for good. She then quietly left the flat.

When Florence reached the street, she walked at a rapid pace for the distance of several blocks without looking behind her, neither knowing nor caring where she was going, impelled by the one idea of putting as much distance as possible between her and the place to which her husband had brought her. But when she was what she believed to be a long way from the flat, she slackened her pace and began to consider what she should do. She had but little money—not sufficient to take her back to her home in the country—not even to stop at an expensive hotel for any length of time. She had, therefore, but one alternative—to go to some cheap place where her money would keep her for a few days, and in the meantime write home for funds upon which to return. She did not dream that her father

was in the city, and if she had known it, she would not have known where to find him. As she continued to walk, she at length came upon a sign in a window announcing that boarders were taken there, and as the place had the appearance of respectability, she ascended the stoop and rang the bell. She was soon ushered into the parlor, where she was joined by the landlady, and made application for board.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SPECTER ARTIST.

Sydney Parkinson, having regained something of his strength, and feeling that the fresh air would revive him, allowed himself to be prevailed upon by Mr. Meredith, late in the afternoon, to walk out with the double purpose of exercise and dining. After a leisurely stroll up Broadway as far as Union Square, a few turns about the little park and a rest on one of the benches, they returned to the St. Denis restaurant, where the artist was in the habit of dining, and ordered dinner.

Sydney had been somewhat revived in spirit by the late conversation with his old friend, and talked with something of his accustomed cheerfulness.

"I realize now that I committed a grievous error in picking a quarrel with this fellow," he said, after some conversation on other topics had passed between the friends. "I should simply have followed him and seen where he went. Had I done that, instead of allowing my passion to get the better of me, I would not only have been spared this bruised head, but we would, no doubt, have known ere this where he has Florence imprisoned."

"Imprisoned?" echoed his friend.

"Yes, that is the only word for it; for I am positive she would not remain with him an hour if she were not restrained."

"I believe you may be right, my boy, unless—"

"Of course," interrupted Sydney, guessing what his companion was about to say, "unless she still imagines this rascal to be myself."

"Which does not seem possible at this length of time."

"No, it does not seem possible," returned the artist. "And yet," he pursued, with a returning shadow of his old doubt, "we cannot forget that she did not discover the difference when he was travelling with you."

"Very true," admitted the old man, bitterly. "But it is my belief that, now they are married, he will cease to conceal his real identity and make a clean breast to her, in which case I am sure she will desert him, if possible. It is on this that I base my hope."

"But suppose she should succeed in making her escape, she would not know where to go in this great city. Remember, she does not know that we are here."

"True enough, but she would have no trouble in finding her way back home, and she would lose no time in going."

"In which case we should soon hear from her, I presume."

"Undoubtedly, and for that reason we may as well rest easy for a few days in the hope of hearing from her," suggested Mr. Meredith.

"No, I cannot rest easy," declared Sydney. "No matter what theories we may have in that direction, I must still continue to search for Florence. It is the only way I can keep away despair."

When the two friends returned to the studio, being

greatly fatigued, Mr. Meredith from his two nights' loss of sleep and Sydney from his wound, they retired early. For many hours, however, the artist could not sleep after retiring. But he, at length, dropped off into a restless, half-waking slumber, during which he was haunted with all sorts of weird and unearthly dreams. At one time he would be climbing almost perpendicular mountains with Florence, and, suddenly, as they were just nearing the summit, exhausted and breathless, they would be confronted by some horrible monster, with the face of his double, only distorted into the sublimity of diabolicalness ; and this monster would shove them off the precipice, hurling them down, down into limitless chasms. At another time he would be strolling with Florence along a shady walk amid the divinest scenes the eye ever beheld ; with far-stretching vistas of cool greenness, of fair fields dotted over with myriads of variegated flowers, whose perfume, wafted on the gentle breeze, intoxicated the senses ; of cool, clear brooks that sang a sensuous and soothing lullaby. And then this delightful phantasmagoria would suddenly vanish, and he would stand upon the margin of a dismal morass, filled with crocodiles, serpents and all manner of hideous and repulsive reptiles ; and among them would be one more loathsome than all the rest, and it would bear the distorted face of Bernard Livingstone. Awaking from one of these dreams at last, he was surprised and startled at seeing a brilliant light streaming in from the studio, which adjoined his bedroom. His first impression was that the old gentleman had lit the gas in the studio, but a glance at the cot where he had retired showed him to be in his place and sleeping soundly. Fearing, therefore, that something was wrong, he stepped quickly through the door into the studio. Glancing in the direction of the light,

which was directly over the easel, a sight met his gaze which startled, terrified him for the instant. There, before his easel, stood the counterpart of himself, calmly working away on his unfinished picture!

Sydney's first impression was that it was his double, who, having effected an entrance by some inexplicable means, had chosen this method of frightening the artist by investing himself with apparently superhuman attributes. But—was it the result of an overwrought imagination?—as he gazed at the apparition, it did not appear to him to be human. There was to his eyes, a nebulous appearance to it, and, moreover, a pale, filmy nimbus seemed to encircle it, rendering it exceedingly ghost-like! It was in vain that he tried to convince himself that it was an optical illusion, or that he still dreamed.

Practical and materialistic as the artist was by nature, this unearthly apparition unnerved him for the moment, and his knees began to smite together under him. This may have been superinduced to some extent by the fever incident to his late injury, coupled with a naturally strong imagination. But it was only for an instant. With a stubborn effort, he cast off the superstitious weakness which had for the moment undermined his manhood, and considered the unaccountable appearance of his double and rival in this place from a rational standpoint. His first impulse, as soon as he arrived at this conclusion, was to rush upon and throttle the intruder. But a second thought determined him to act with less impetuosity and prepare himself for the encounter. He made no demonstration and moved as noiselessly as possible, that he might not attract the fellow's attention, and after taking another look to satisfy himself that he had not been the victim of an optical illusion, glided back into

his bedroom. Here he clad himself in such garments as came handiest, put his feet into a pair of felt slippers that he might walk the more silently, and, shoving a revolver into his side-pocket, again stepped to the door.

The apparition was still there, working away as placidly upon the picture as though he owned the studio.

This incensed him to such a degree that he was on the point of raising the revolver and shooting the intruder on the spot. This he could easily have done, as the mysterious artist stood with his back to him, but Sydney suddenly considered the cowardliness of such a proceeding, and returned the weapon to his pocket. He would meet him in a manly way, but he would meet him; and, as he now had his rival in a position in which it was impossible for him to escape, he would demand and compel him to reveal the whereabouts of Florence, after which he would administer such chastisement as the occasion seemed to warrant.

To this end Sydney moved noiselessly toward the easel, in such a manner as to put himself between the mysterious artist and the door, so that escape would be impossible.

Meanwhile, the man at the easel worked away with the indifference of one who had no right to expect interruption, which convinced Sydney that he was as yet unaware of his presence. A dozen quick, noiseless strides brought him to the door, and his first care was to see that it was locked. To his surprise, the door was just as he had left it on retiring—locked and bolted. This was the first set-back to his attempted rational solution of the mystery, for the door was the only way by which the intruder could have entered. But he was too much agitated just then to consider this seri-

ously, and turned upon the apparition at the easel. He was no more than four yards away, and exhibited a side-face to Sydney. The latter was strongly impressed with the striking resemblance of his double to himself. Every curve and line and detail of the face was the same. Even the slight droop of the left eye and a small mole on his right cheek were there. The likeness was perfect, and he no longer wondered that the fellow had been able to impose himself upon the unsuspecting as Sydney.

So strongly impressed was he with the discovery that for an instant he was again unmanned. It seemed impossible that two men could in reality be so much alike, and for the second time his materialism deserted him, and for a brief moment he wavered on the verge of the belief that the apparition before him was no man of flesh and blood, but a veritable phantom. But the thought was only transitory. The succeeding instant he cast the foolish superstition aside, and nerved himself with the determination to probe the mystery to the bottom.

With a quick movement he placed himself nearer to and face to face with his double. He was now within six feet of him, and facing him, but the mysterious artist did not deign to raise his eyes from his work. This was a surprise to Sydney. It was impossible that the other could still be ignorant of his presence. That the mysterious artist might have no excuse for this ignorance, however, Sydney cleared his throat.

But it was no use. The painter did not raise his eyes, and went on with his work as unconsciously as if he had been a thousand miles from any human being. This greatly incensed Sydney, for he felt that nothing short of a stubborn determination on the part of his double to ignore him could have impelled this strange

conduct. He therefore resolved to make him sensible of the situation, if he was in reality flesh and blood; and he determined to do it in such a way that, if he had a spark of manhood in him, he must resent it.

"Fellow!" he demanded, in a terrible voice. "Perhaps you can explain the meaning of your presence here?"

The artist raised his eyes languidly from the canvas and allowed them to rest for an instant on the questioner's face, while an expression of the utmost indifference characterized his own, and then dropped them again, and went on with his work.

This action stung Sydney to the soul.

It was with the greatest effort he restrained himself from flying at the other and throttling him. But he swallowed his wrath, with an effort, and pursued:

"Will you answer my question, sir? Or shall I choke it out of you?"

This was uttered in such vigorous and strident tones that the fellow could not have helped hearing it, unless he was deaf, and the echoes of the young man's voice rang through the large and nearly empty room in startling reverberation. But its only effect upon the mysterious artist was to cause him to again raise his eyes languidly to the interrogator's face, and the same stolidness of countenance characterized him as before, but he uttered no word, and soon resumed his painting.

At this moment Sydney heard a footstep in the rear of the studio, and glancing in the direction, saw Mr. Meredith standing, apparently transfixed with amazement. His eyes were fixed upon the man at the easel, and evidently did not see Sydney.

Parkinson transferred his gaze to the mysterious painter again, and finding him still placidly at work, was wrought up to such a tension of rage that he could

no longer contain himself. Taking another stride toward the easel, so as to bring himself within arm's length of the painter, he raised his hand and struck out with all the strength he possessed. His fist came in contact with a hard substance, and he awoke to find the old gentleman standing over him, holding in his hand a lamp, the light of which glowed into Sydney's face.

"What's the matter, my boy?" inquired Meredith. "Having a nightmare?"

"Oh, I have had such a horrible dream," replied Sydney, "or rather, a series of dreams, and they—at least the last one—seemed so real that I can scarcely yet bring myself to believe that it was all a dream."

"I thought you must be having something of the kind, for I never heard a man make such a noise in his sleep in the whole course of my life. I actually thought you were dying. It's the result of your fever, my boy—and lying on your back. Never sleep on your back unless you want to have bad dreams."

Sydney then related his dreams, and in such a vivid manner that his friend was almost as deeply affected as the dreamer himself had been.

So strongly impressed was the artist with the reality of his dreams that he could not be satisfied until he had taken the lamp from the old gentleman and gone into the studio and reconnoitered.

CHAPTER X.

THE PICTURED FACE.

Mr. Meredith watched the young man's movements with mingled amusement and concern. He could not help being amused at the manner in which he poked about the studio, light in hand, peeping into every nook and cranny, as though he expected to find some of the hideous creatures of his vision lurking there; and he was somewhat concerned lest the young man's troubles were undermining his reason. At length the old gentleman thought proper to put an end to what he looked upon as very foolish conduct, and said:

"Now, my boy, don't you think we had better return to bed? We both need rest, especially you."

"Yes, pretty soon," replied Sydney, trying the door for the twentieth time, and taking another peep behind some heap of canvas that leaned against the wall.

"This looks like child's play to you, no doubt; but those horrible dreams have worked upon my mind, so that I am positive I sha'n't be able to sleep if I do retire. However, do not let me hinder you from going to bed, my friend."

"But you, my boy, are in greater need of sleep than I am. A few hours' sleep will do wonders with both of us." And the old man yawned sleepily.

"Yes, a few hours' rest will refresh us, Mr. Meredith; and in the morning—or rather this morning—when we arise, we can resume our search with renewed vigor and— Great Heaven!"

"What is it?" And the old man jumped at the artist's exclamation as though an apparition had suddenly stepped out before him.

Sydney had approached the picture and now stood before it. A deadly pallor had spread over his face, and he stood with outstretched, trembling hand, pointing toward the canvas, but appeared unable to utter a word.

The old gentleman came near, and screening his eyes from the flaring light, scrutinized the painting. But he was unable to discover the cause of the artist's agitation, and repeated:

"What is it?"

"Don't you see!" gasped Sydney, pointing with his trembling finger at a certain face among a group on the canvas. "Look at that face! It is *hers!*"

The subject of the picture was "The Inspired Chorister," and Florence had been made the central figure.

Examining the picture more closely, the other saw what the artist meant, and started back with an expression of astonishment and awe.

"It *is* Florence's face!" he exclaimed. But his agitation was clearly the outgrowth of that of the young man's, for a moment later he said: "Well, what of it, Sydney? You painted the picture."

"Yes, but I did not paint that face," he declared excitedly. "I had only made a rough sketch of that figure, and now look at it! It is a speaking likeness of Florence. It is the work of—"

"The ghost," interposed the old man, laughing.

Sydney shuddered.

The recollection of his dream came upon him so vividly that he could not dispel the delusion that there was a foundation of reality about it. It did not occur to him that the other artist could have done the work during his absence that day.

He could not help associating the pictured face with his dream.

But a second later he realized how absurd the idea was, and he turned abruptly from the easel and strode toward the rear of the studio. Entering the bedroom, he threw himself upon his couch without undressing and strove to compose himself to slumber. Meredith also came in a moment later, and, lying down upon the other couch, was soon snoring lustily in spite of his late perturbation.

There was no sleep for Sydney, however. For more than two hours he lay there tossing and vainly trying to sleep. It was no use. His mind was too much disturbed with the events of the past day or two to permit of such a thing. Finally he abandoned the attempt, arose, made his toilet and went out upon the street.

It was still early and few people were yet abroad. Sydney strolled on, neither knowing nor caring where he went. On, on, he went, getting farther and farther away from his studio, but he heeded it not. Block after block was passed, and soon the streets began to fill with pedestrians, but he passed them unheedingly, as one walking in a dream might have done. He had unconsciously got into Fifth Avenue, and was following that great thoroughfare toward the upper end of the city.

At length he ceased to meet the throng. He had come to that portion of the street inhabited by the rich, and the houses were still closed, and the inmates

—if, indeed, they were in the city—still locked in slumber.

At length, either from a half-conscious sense of weariness (for he was going up hill) or some other cause which he himself could not have explained, he turned into a side street. Having done so, he pursued his course in this direction unremittingly for some distance. He was going toward the east side of the city, and soon came into the poorer quarter. How far he went in this direction, or how far he would have gone, he never could have told, had he not come at length to a place where the street was closed, and he turned uptown again. But he only walked a block in this direction, when some occult power seemed to impel him to turn toward the east once more. Here he came upon a school building, and swarms of boys and girls of all ages filled the street. For some inexplicable reason he felt like shunning the laughing, romping throng. Perhaps their sunshine and gladness increased the bitterness of his soul by contrast. At all events, he crossed the street to avoid them. But he had no more than done so, when his eyes, as he glanced up furtively, met a sight which caused him to stop short and to hold his breath for an instant.

There, coming directly toward him, was a woman. She walked with her eyes bent upon the ground, as he had been in the habit of doing, but when Sydney crossed the street and came within a few yards of her, she raised her eyes to his face. Then it was that the young artist paused and his heart ceased to beat. *The woman was Florence!*

Sydney was too much startled and awed to speak or do anything but stare, and the girl appeared to be in the same condition. This continued for perhaps a minute, when the artist regained his presence of mind, and

made a quick movement toward her with outstretched hands, crying :

"Florence ! At last !"

But, to his unutterable surprise and dismay, instead of responding or even allowing him to approach, the girl turned and fled like a wild fawn.

Sydney was bewildered. He did not know what to make of her conduct. Could it be possible that she did not recognize him ? No, he reflected a little later, this was not possible. And then suddenly the truth flashed upon him. Florence *had* recognized him, and that was the very reason she had fled from him. And the fact that she was the wife of another, and that he had no claim upon her affections, never came upon him in its true reality till that moment. But it stood before him vividly enough now, and he saw how foolish he had been to waste his time and torture his soul in trying to find a woman who was not only the lawful wife of another man but who spurned him to such a degree as to flee at sight of him.

With these bitter reflections weighing upon him, the artist turned and proceeded to retrace his steps in the direction of his studio. He walked as far as Fifth Avenue only, however, when his sense of fatigue came so strongly upon him that he took passage in the first down-going stage that came along, and in the course of a few minutes he found himself back at the studio.

Mr. Meredith was up, and anxiously awaiting his return. Sydney deemed it prudent to say nothing of the incident just recorded, and after explaining that he had gone out for a walk, without any of its details, the two friends left the studio and sought the restaurant for their breakfast.

"I have been thinking," began the old gentleman, after they had exhausted the ordinary topics upon

which they had been engaged, "that the best thing we can do is to procure the services of a regular detective."

"What for?" inquired Sydney, absently.

"Well," rejoined the other, "to try to find some trace of Florence. I have come to the conclusion that we shall never be able to do it without assistance."

Sydney shrugged his shoulders with an air of indifference.

"So far as I am concerned," he returned, "I don't know but your suggestion is a good one. As regards Florence, however—"

He stopped abruptly, and his companion looked at him inquiringly; and as the artist did not appear inclined to proceed, he finally said:

"'As regards Florence,' you were saying, Sydney?"

Another shrug, and then:

"I don't see why I should trouble myself about her."

The look of pain which his observation had caused to come into the old man's face might have given him a twinge of remorse, if he had remarked it; but the young man was staring into space at that moment, and saw nothing of the effect of his words.

"Why, what on earth do you mean, Sydney?" cried the old gentleman in a tone of horror. "Why shouldn't we trouble ourselves about her, my boy?"

"For the simple reason," retorted Sydney, rather curtly, which reflected the bitterness of his soul, "if you must know the truth, sir, that Florence is too well satisfied where she is to bother about us."

"What makes you think that, Sydney?" questioned the other with a pained and perplexed countenance.

"It is not a matter of opinion," was the cool reply. "I *know* it."

CHAPTER XI.

NEW ACQUAINTANCES.

Mrs. McQuade was not an unkindly woman, though she was exceedingly businesslike, so much so that she had been known to steel her susceptible heart against sentiment when she found it likely to interfere with an advantageous bargain. She was also a woman who never for an instant lost sight of propriety. But whether this was inspired solely by her rigid business principles, as she had been accused by certain uncharitable people, I shall not attempt to decide. Of course, policy no less than piety would counsel a woman of her sterling perspicacity to admit no one to her house whose character was such as to cause regular and prompt-paying boarders to leave. It is not to be wondered at, then, that Mrs. McQuade was a trifle inquisitive touching Florence's antecedents, when the girl applied for board and lodging in the McQuade establishment. Not only did she put Florence through a severe catechism regarding her past life and moral character, but also incidentally, and in a delicate way, her present financial *status*.

Poor Florence! It was a severe ordeal for her. It was her first contact with the sharp, jagged edges of the practical world, and she had never learned to dissemble. She still believed in the obsolete aphorism that "honesty is the best policy." She knew it to be the best principle, and had never stopped to consider the distinction between principle and policy.

Mrs. McQuade was a large, portly woman, with a double chin, bleached hair and a superfluity of jewelry. Her eyes were a trifle watery, but alert, and her mouth broad and straight-cut, without a line or curve of weakness in it. She swept into the half-darkened parlor into which Florence had been shown, and where she sat huddled into a corner of a great chair, limp, crushed and trembling with apprehension, and towering over the cringing girl like some great barbarian queen, asked:

"Did you wish to see me, madam?"

Florence had never been addressed as "madam" before, and it gave her an unpleasant start, for she somehow imagined this woman had already discovered her secret.

"Ye-es, ma-am," faltered the girl. "I—I—would like to engage board for—for—a little while, if you've no objection."

Her half-frightened manner would have convinced any other person than Mrs. McQuade of the girl's want of experience, but that acute woman of the world thought she saw something behind all this, and at once jumped to the conclusion that there was something wrong. However, after staring at Florence for a minute or so, she condescended to become sufficiently gracious to smile indulgently upon her, after which she flopped down upon a chair at her side and gave her another stare of oily solicitude.

"FLORENCE! AT LAST!"—*See Page 93.*

"Look a-here," she began, "if I'm not mistaken, you're in trouble, young lady. Am I right? But I know I am, and you'd as well tell me all about it first as last. You needn't have no fear of its going any farther, and you'll find no better friend than Nancy McQuade, if I do say it myself."

The poor girl looked at her in speechless amazement. What manner of person was this, to have discovered the secret she imagined to be locked in her own heart beyond the penetration of any human besides herself?

"Yes, ma'am," the girl faltered at last, glancing timidly at the elephantine oracle towering over her. "I am in a little trouble. That is—"

"I knew it," interrupted the woman. "I knew it the moment I set eyes on you. Who is the man?"

This demand frightened Florence unutterably. She did not quite comprehend the woman's drift, but her question conveyed a vague meaning of something sinful and repugnant to the innocent girl's mind, and she responded quickly:

"My husband, ma'am."

The woman pursed her lips and bestowed a glance of scornful pity upon Florence.

"Oh, yes," she muttered, in what was obviously intended for a tone of sympathy. "That's what they all say, poor souls! Deserted ye, I s'pose?"

The implication of the utterance, as well as the patronizing spirit in which it was made, stung the girl deeply and aroused her indignation.

"No, he did not desert me!" she retorted, with spirit. "I—I—left him!"

"Ah! Oh, well, it's the same thing!" said the landlady, with a scornful toss of her bronze curls. "Made it so hot for ye that ye had to get out, I reckon?"

Florence was in a sad dilemma. Every utterance of hers was only plunging her deeper into the tangled complication, and there was no hope of extricating herself but by detailing the account of her strange adventure. But would it be discreet or politic to do this? Could she trust this woman with her secret? And while she was struggling with her conflicting emotions the woman interrupted her with:

"You'd as well tell me all about it, young lady. You kin trust me as your own mother, and the sooner we understand each other the better it 'll be for both. Only don't try to hide nothing from me, for I kin read folks' minds like a book. Don't lay all the blame onto *him*, or anything like that, for I know human natur' as I know my A B C's."

It was a cruel task for the poor girl, and it cost her the greatest effort of her life to do it; but spurred to the effort by the woman's insinuating solicitude, coupled with her own conscious innocence, she undertook the task and succeeded beyond her hopes. Beginning with the accidental meeting with the young artist in Europe, she related the strange story of her courtship down to the time of her unwilling marriage and her coming to New York with him; of her discovery of what appeared to be his falseness, and finally of her resolve to leave him forever.

The woman heard it all through with commendable patience, mingled with a slight shade of incredulity, and at its conclusion said:

"Then your parents were willing for the marriage?"

"Oh, yes," replied Florence, timidly. "You see, they believed, as I did, that he was a perfect gentleman, and, so far as we know, he is. Only somehow he did not seem to be the same man I had been betrothed to, and the more I thought the matter over, the more

fully convinced I became that I could never love or live with him."

"Humph!" growled the woman. She was evidently disappointed, for even her practical, unsympathetic mind could not help recognizing the truth of every utterance the girl had made. Her simplicity and child-like reliance proved that beyond the possibility of a doubt. "What d'ye propose doing?" she asked.

"There is but one thing for me to do," replied Florence, "and that is to stay here or some place for a few days, and in the meantime write home to papa for money to take me home."

"You have no money, then?" caught up the wily landlady, quickly.

"Oh, yes—a little," rejoined the girl, simply. "Enough, I hope, to pay my board till I hear from home."

"Um!" grumbled the woman. "It 's purty expensive living in the city, you know. How long will it take to get an answer from your folks, d' ye think?"

"Not more than three or four days, I think."

"Yes? How much money have you got?"

Florence, in her simplicity, took her purse from her pocket and counted over the change therein contained.

"Almost five dollars," she said, looking up, with an exultant smile. But when she encountered the inflexible, calculating face of the landlady, her spirits sank.

"My rates are eight dollars a week," interposed Mrs. McQuade, with a business air, "invariably in advance, and I take nobody for less than a week."

Florence drew a deep sigh and gazed at her helplessly.

"You see," pursued the woman, coldly, "you haven't

got any baggage to speak of, and I can't afford to take no risks."

Florence was silent. And then, after a little reflection, she concluded the interview was at an end, and arose dispiritedly and took up her little hand-bag.

"You may find a cheaper place," volunteered Mrs. McQuade, in the same tone of forced sympathy. "But," and it seemed as if a sudden impulse had found its way into her gross anatomy, "see here, I s'pose your folks have got money?"

"Plenty of it," replied Florence, brightening with fresh hope.

"Rich?" questioned the other.

"Yes, ma'am; my father is considered about the richest man in our part of the country."

"And you think there 's no doubt that they 'll send you money purty soon?"

"I know they will—as soon as they hear from me."

The woman reflected for some moments, and her spirit of greed got the ascendency of her usual discretion. She evidently disliked to miss an opportunity for gain, even at the risk of losing a trifle in the event of Florence's story turning out false. But to the girl's unsuspecting mind the change had been wrought in the woman by no other motive than pure motherly sympathy.

"Well," she said, in a patronizing tone, "seeing that you are a stranger and haven't got no friends in the city, I guess I 'll let you stop with me for a little while —till you hear from your folks."

The poor girl could find no words to express her gratitude, and could scarcely refrain from throwing her arms about the woman's neck and kissing her. She did go to the extent of grasping her large, red, moist hand and wringing it, while tears of heartfelt thankfulness

streamed down her cheeks. But the woman put her aside with good-natured, self-sacrificing indifference, as though her whole life had been devoted to just such acts of unselfih goodness, and, after taking the last penny Florence possessed, showed her up to a room.

It was a stuffy, cramped little box of a room, lighted and ventilated with but one small window, which opened into a dim, sour-smelling air-shaft. The little furniture there was in the apartment was old-fashioned, battered and frayed, and to add to her further discomfort, Florence noticed that there was a pale, sickly looking girl, who, the landlady explained, was to share the room and the narrow, comfortless bed with her.

"This is Miss Forsythe, Mrs.—Mrs.—What did you say your name was?" interrogated the landlady.

"Florence Meredith," replied the girl, timidly.

"You two'll have to git along together," pursued Mrs. McQuade; and having done her whole duty, the excellent lady flounced out of the room, leaving the two girls together.

Miss Forsythe darted a quick, inquiring glance at Florence as soon as the door had closed on the landlady, and was a little startled at her pink cheeks and sweet, innocent face, with its frank, childish eyes. There might have been a twinge of envy in the poor, starved heart as she contrasted the face with her own pallid one, and it is certain that she glanced at her own faded dress after taking an inventory of Florence's costly garment, and then she bent her poor, weary eyes upon her sewing again and tried to forget that there were happier people in the world than herself. And when Florence looked at the pinched, sallow face, the great, hollow, hungry eyes, and the starved-looking body, her gentle heart was touched with compassion. Her dread and repugnance vanished together, and she

felt that she would like to do something for the poor creature, whom she assumed at once to be friendless. She felt that she would like to be a friend to her, and have her friendship in return, for the sad, worn face looked susceptible of sympathy. But how should she approach her? How was she to break the ice? And she decided to await an opportunity, which she was sure would present itself in time. Meanwhile she took off her hat and hung it on a vacant peg she found on the wall, and then stopped in front of the wretched little mirror long enough to glance at herself and brush her curls back from her forehead. After that she took off her sacque and looked about for a place to hang it up, but finding none, turned to her room-mate with the laughing inquiry:

"Where do you hang things, Miss Forsythe?"

The girl arose wearily and, taking the garment, opened a door which Florence had failed to notice before, and which opened into a closet. Florence noticed that the closet was empty with the exception of one or two poor articles of clothing.

"I hang my things in there—what few there are," explained the girl.

There was a note of pathos in the thin, piping voice and the hopeless resignation of the girl's manner that touched Florence, and her sympathetic heart went out to her.

Again she struggled for a means of approaching the girl, and, at length, thought she had discovered one.

"Have you boarded here long?" she inquired.

"Oh, I don't board here," replied Miss Forsythe, looking up with a quick, nervous movement, for she had again seated herself to her sewing. "I only room here."

"Oh!"

And Florence found herself at a standstill again.

"I used to board here," pursued the girl, in a weary voice, "but I was making more money then. Since I lost my place in the store and have had to depend on such odd jobs of sewing as I can get, I could not afford to pay my board; but Mrs. McQuade allowed me to keep the room."

"You have to pay for that, don't you?" inquired Florence, curiously.

"Yes, but she only charges me three dollars for that."

"Three dollars for the privilege of staying in such a wretched place!" mused Florence. And then she asked, in her ingenuous way: "But what do you do for your meals?"

"Oh, dear, don't ask me that!" murmured the girl, with a sad smile. "It will sound strange to such as you for me to tell you that it often happens that I don't have any."

"Don't have anything to eat?" gasped Florence, with a look of horror.

"Often," affirmed the other.

"But that is only once in a while, and just a single meal?"

"No, indeed. I frequently go for days together without a mouthful. But I shouldn't be telling you this, for you can take no interest in such as I am."

"I do take an interest in you," declared Florence, the tears starting in her eyes, "and—and I would like to be your friend, if—if you would let me, although just now I am as poor as yourself. But when you haven't anything to eat why don't you go to the landlady and tell her just how you are situated? I am sure she would gladly help you."

The girl stole a queer glance at Florence, and her expression seemed to say: "Well, you are green!"

"That shows that you don't know Mrs. McQuade," she murmured, with the same faint smile. "Not only would she give me nothing to eat if I asked her for it, but, as likely as not, she would put me out of the room for my pains. Indeed, she would put me out at any time if I allowed my rent to fall behind. And often I have had to pawn my clothing to raise money to pay her. I used to have some jewelry, but that all went long ago."

Florence was saddened by this intelligence more than anything that ever came into her happy life. She could never have believed that there was such suffering in the world, and above all, she could not have imagined that there were such heartless people in the world as this girl described the landlady to be. She sank upon a low stool close to the girl and looked into her sad face through her tears.

"I am very sorry for you," she said, "and, as I shall soon have money, you shall share it with me. And that reminds me that I must write a letter home. I wonder where I can get a pen and ink?"

"I have none," rejoined the girl, sadly. "I have no use for them."

CHAPTER XII.

FANNY'S STORY.

After a good deal of hesitation, Florence mustered sufficient courage to go down and ask the landlady to let her have writing materials, in order that she might write home for money. Mrs. McQuade was too wide awake to her own interests to refuse the request under the circumstances, and not only granted a single sheet of very cheap paper and an equally cheap-looking envelope, but even gave the girl a stamp, all of which it was understood she was to repay as soon as her money should arrive.

Florence then sat down and wrote as long a letter as her limited supply of paper would permit, filling in all the margins and corners, and still not having written half of what she had to tell. The letter was written to her father, and she related all the circumstances, as far as space would permit, that had happened since their separation at the little station at Jonesboro. She finally mentioned the fact that she had left her husband, and waited anxiously for her father to send her money to take her home. Having completed the letter, placed it in the envelope, sealed, addressed and stamped it, she took it out, in accordance with the landlady's directions, and posted it in a box on the corner of the street.

When she got back to the room it had grown quite dark in that dingy little place, so much so that she

could scarcely discern more than the outlines of the other girl, and yet the poor creature was sitting close to the window and stitching away in the dim light.

"Why, Miss Forsythe," she exclaimed, "I don't see how you can sew in the dark! You'll ruin your eyes."

"Oh, I'm used to it," rejoined the other, with forced cheerfulness. "I don't mind it."

"But have you no lamp?"

"Yes, there is a lamp over there, but I like to sew as long as I can by daylight, to save the oil."

"Doesn't the landlady furnish you with light?" asked Florence, in surprise.

"Indeed she doesn't. She used to when I was a boarder, but now she says she can't afford it for three dollars a week, especially as I work at night and use a good deal of oil. She ought to furnish you a lamp, though, as you are a boarder."

At this juncture the supper-bell rang, and it filled Florence with a sort of dread and misgiving, for she knew the other girl could not go with her.

"That's your supper," admonished Miss Forsythe. "You'd better go down, as the landlady doesn't like to wait for anybody."

"But you are going—to—*your* supper, aren't you?" faltered Florence.

"No, not this evening," returned the girl. "I'm not hungry. Go and get your supper, dear."

Florence saw that it was useless to say anything further on the subject, as she was only harrowing up both their minds by doing so, and with a regretful glance at the poor girl, left the room.

When Florence entered the dining-room she was graciously received by the landlady, and a series of impudent stares from the two long rows of boarders, mostly men, who lined the long table. Florence was

at a loss to understand the former, and was so abashed by the latter that she felt her cheeks burn, and she was unable to raise her eyes from her plate during the meal. The meal was rather a frugal affair, and as the unwelcome attention the girl received from the other guests took away what appetite she had, she soon left her place at the table and started to return to her room. But by the time she reached the parlor floor she found the landlady at her heels.

"I wish you would step into the parlor a moment, Mrs. Meredith," said the landlady, graciously. "I would like to speak to you."

Wondering what the woman could want to speak to her about, Florence followed her into parlor.

"What I desired to say was this," began Mrs. McQuade, in a confidential tone, as soon as they were seated: "When I put you in the room with Miss Forsythe, it was the only room I had, because I expected another party this evening, but now I find they are not coming, and I can put you into a much better room, where you will be alone. I know that will suit you better."

"But the price, Mrs. McQuade?" ventured Florence.

"Will be the same—to *you*, my dear," interposed the woman.

"Nevertheless," protested the girl, "it will make more trouble and expense for you, and—"

"Don't mention it. I know that you have been used to better accommodations than you are getting in that little cubbyhole, and I propose that you shall have the best my house can afford. I think I know a lady when I see one."

"But that poor girl?" again objected Florence. "I have taken an interest in her, and I think she has in me, and I dislike to leave her."

"Pooh!" sneered the good woman. "What do you want to bother your precious head about that creature for? She is nobody! A mere sewing-girl, that can scarcely rake money enough together to pay her rent, and hasn't enough to buy a meal's victuals half the time."

"For that reason more than any other I do not like to leave her."

"My dear young lady, you are making a great mistake. I tell you she is not worth your while. She used to have fine dresses and loads of jewelry; and now where are they? All gone to her uncle's!"

"Indeed!" cried the innocent girl, in horror. "Has she an uncle who is mean enough to take her clothing and jewelry?"

The landlady laughed.

"What a poor, silly child you are!" she said. "I mean the pawnshop. She has pawned everything she possessed nearly, and if you remain with her long, she will have your things in hock."

As the woman spoke she cast a hungry glance at the half-dozen valuable rings on Florence's fingers and at the place in her bosom where she had seen the girl replace her gold watch after consulting it while writing her letter. Could it be possible that the sight of these had had anything to do with working the change in the woman's demeanor toward her? After some reflection, Florence said:

"Very well, Mrs. McQuade. If you wish it, I shall take the other room, provided you will allow me to pay a little more for it when my money comes. And while I am on the subject, I would like to make another request."

"Anything, my dear," rejoined the other, unctuously. "Anything that you request shall be granted. What is it?"

"I wish you would furnish that poor girl her meals as long as I stay here, and I shall pay you for it as soon as I receive my remittance."

The landlady indulged in another gracious laugh.

"What a foolish little dear you are, to be sure!" she cried. "Well, if you request it. You know I can refuse you nothing."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. McQuade!" cried Florence, rapturously. "You are very good. I don't know how I shall ever repay you. But you shall be well paid, so far as money can do it. Just one more request, please."

"Oh, dear, what a tease you are! I declare you could coax a body's heart and soul away from them. But what is it, dear?"

"Won't you let me take her supper up to her? It will please the poor creature so, and I am sure she would feel embarrassed to go down into the dining-room before all the boarders."

"I declare!" cried the landlady, rising, "you will want to have the house turned topsy-turvy for that creature next! But never mind! I can refuse *you* nothing, and it shall be granted. You wait here, and I'll have the servant fetch the tray up to you. It's a lucky day when Fanny Forsythe made *your* acquaintance, I can vouch," she said, as she departed.

A few moments later, the servant arrived with a tray well laden with the choicest viands the establishment could afford.

"Sha'n't I carry it up for ye?" asked the servant.

When Florence looked at the size and guessed at the probable weight of the tray, she said he might carry it as fas as the room door. He did so, and then Florence relieved him of it, allowed him to get down the stairs, and then knocked at the door. When poor Fanny saw the well-filled tray she almost fainted.

"Why, what on earth have you been doing?" she questioned, breathlessly.

"Oh, nothing," laughed Florence. "Just brought you a bite to eat, that's all."

"How absurd! I told you I wasn't a bit hungry, and—"

But the eagerness with which she eyed the tempting array of dishes belied her words.

"But it was *so* kind of you," pursued the girl. "And I only a stranger, and—"

"Not a word, my dear," interrupted Florence, putting the tray down on a chair, and arranging the dishes on the little table. "I told you I wanted to be your friend, but the time came before I expected it. There, now, sit down and eat your supper. Gracious, what a smoky lamp! It doesn't make as much light as a piece of chalk in a teacup. But go on and eat, my dear. And, say, you 're to have your meals regular as long as I stay here. Won't that be grand?"

"Oh, what a sweet creature you are!" cried the other, her eyes filling with tears. "Really, I never expected to find such a friend."

Florence was silent for some moments, meanwhile watching the half-famished girl eat, and the sight filled her with more genuine happiness than she had experienced for many a day. At length she said:

"Your name is Fanny, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied the other, looking up from her plate with a gentle smile, such as Florence had not seen before. "Will you call me that?"

"I should be glad to," said the other. "My name is Florence, and I should like it if you would call me that."

"I shall love to, ever so much. But the landlady called you missus when she introduced you. Have you been married, Florence?"

"Yes and no," rejoined the girl, with a laugh.

"Huh! That's funny. But it's none of my business. Don't tell me about it unless you want to. But it must be nice to be married, and have some one to take care of you. I came very near being married myself once." And the girl drew a deep sigh.

"How was it, Fanny?" inquired Florence. "But, there, I am more inquisitive than you. Don't tell me unless you have a mind to."

"I should like to—if you care to hear it."

"I should, ever so much."

"Well, it was while I was working in the store. There was a gentleman who used to come every day, nearly, to get something, and he would have nobody wait on him but me. So we got to be very well acquainted, and at last he got to waiting for me when I came out, and would walk home with me. At length he got to taking me to the theatre and other places of amusement. Well, finally he asked me to marry him, and, as he seemed to be such a nice man, and I hadn't any friends, I accepted him. The wedding was to have come off a year ago last May, and I was nearly ready, when one day I received a letter from him, saying that he had been called away to Europe, and I needn't be surprised if I never saw him again. The news nearly broke my heart, and it was through my despair over it that I lost my place in the store; and from that day to this I haven't had the ambition to look for another situation, and, between you and me, I haven't cared whether I lived or died. But your friendship, dear, good Florence, has put new life into me, and I shall try to make something of myself again."

Her story, told in the running, sketchy manner it was, nevertheless made a deep impression upon Florence, and after asking for a few more little details, she

volunteered to tell her own little romance. At its conclusion Fanny asked :

"You say he was an artist?"

"Yes," replied Florence.

"That's funny!" interjected Fanny. "Mine was too."

"Indeed! What was his name?"

"Bernard Livingstone."

Florence was too much stunned to speak for several minutes. The room swam before her eyes, and she was compelled to cling to a chair to prevent herself from reeling to the floor. But she managed to calm herself with an effort, and asked feebly :

"What was he like?"

Fanny, who had noticed nothing of her friend's agitation, arose and went to a little trunk in one corner of the room, and presently returned with a photograph.

"There," she said, "that is his picture."

Florence's brain reeled again, for the picture was that of her husband!

CHAPTER XIII.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

Sydney Parkinson, having lost all hope of ever recovering Florence, and, indeed, all desire to find her, since he had found, as he supposed, that she was content with her lot, had very little ambition for anything. He did not much care whether he ever completed his picture or not ; and, in fact, he would not have turned his hand over between life and death at that time. He had but one desire in the world, and that was to wreak his vengeance upon his double and tormentor.

He worked in a half-hearted way upon the picture during the greater part of the day, and in the afternoon went out for a walk. Mr. Meredith complained of not feeling well, and so remained behind at the studio.

Sydney was no more than on the street, when an unconquerable desire seized him to revisit the locality where he had seen Florence that morning, and so anxious was he to reach the place as soon as possible, that, instead of walking this time, he took one of the Fifth Avenue stages and rode up as far as the street in which he had seen the girl. Alighting from the stage at this point, he walked at a rapid pace in an easterly direction till he came to the school. By this time the school had

been dismissed and the children had departed, so that the street was well-nigh deserted. He walked through the street in the direction he had seen Florence go, for a distance of several blocks, turned a corner, walked uptown a block and came back on the next street, but no Florence was to be seen. After strolling about for some time through the neighboring streets, watching windows, doorways and passing faces, he finally abandoned the undertaking, cursed himself for a fool for bothering his head about another man's wife, and walked back to Fifth Avenue. Here he again took a stage and rode down as far as Tenth Street. Alighting here, he walked rapidly across to University Place.

Just as he turned into the latter street and was going along with his head down, plunged in deep meditation, he became vaguely conscious that there were three men ahead of him. For several moments after making the discovery he did not pay enough attention to them to notice anything particular about them. At length, however, he glanced casually up, and was astonished to see that one of them was his double and the other two the mysterious individuals he had seen on the train coming to New York. The unexpected discovery had such an effect upon the artist that he stopped short. His action attracted the attention of the three men, who glanced back at him. As soon as they caught sight of him they burst out into a boisterous fit of laughter and resumed their walk with a more rapid gait.

The trio evidently imagined Sydney had been following them, and to disabuse their minds of such an idea he turned abruptly aside and entered a doorway, as though he intended stopping there. There was a showcase next to the window, and he could look through this and watch the retreating figures without being

observed himself. He watched them for some time, and saw them enter the building in which his studio was located. As soon as they disappeared inside Sydney emerged from his place of concealment and hastened to the entrance of the studio building. He arrived at the entrance in time to see the men ascending the stairs, and, allowing them time to reach the top of the second flight, he entered and went up the stairs, but keeping a couple of flights behind them to avoid attracting their attention.

"What will be the result, I wonder," he mused, "when they find the old gentleman in the studio—if they intend going in?"

But he was not to remain in doubt on the latter point long, for by the time he reached the top of the second flight of stairs he saw his double open the studio door and the three go in. As soon as the door was closed Sydney hastened to the top of the building, but instead of entering the studio, he first fastened the door on the outside with the huge padlock, which he had left hanging in the staple; and then taking a step-ladder which stood in the hall, put it up to a small porthole or ventilator there was in the wall. This aperture furnished a view of the interior of the studio, and he climbed up the ladder and put his eyes to it.

The three men stood near the easel, examining and commenting upon the picture as though it belonged to them.

"It is going to be a grand thing," observed the light young man. "But how soon do you think you will have it completed?"

"With no interruption, I can finish it in about three or four days," replied Sydney's impersonator.

This was astonishing intelligence to the young artist, for he knew that he could not finish the picture, work

as he would, inside of two weeks. Still, if the fellow could paint as fast continuously as he had done on the face of Florence Meredith, there was no telling what he could accomplish in three days. That face alone would have cost Sydney several days' arduous labor, and this man had accomplished it in two or three hours at most.

"But," pursued the fair young man, "you must expect interruptions. It is not to be expected that you will not. However, this will be, in a measure, compensated for by the few odd strokes which the young man will put in himself."

Sydney ground his teeth with rage. The "young man" alluded to was undoubtedly meant for himself, and this conversation was being held about the picture which he had conceived and, with the exception of the work which the mysterious artist had put upon it within the last few days, brought to its present stage of development; and yet they spoke of it as if it had been the creation of the other man. It was with a severe effort that Sydney restrained himself from jumping down from the ladder, entering the studio and denouncing the conspirators, as he now conceived them to be. But his curiosity to see to what lengths they would go, as well as the hope of getting a clue to Florence's whereabouts (for, strive as he would, he could not divest himself of this ambition), impelled him to watch and listen instead of acting.

"Yes, he will do something on it in the meantime," admitted the mysterious artist, "but he works intolerably slow. By the way, what do you think of the face —painted from memory, too?"

"Marvelous!" ejaculated both of the artist's companions in a breath. "It lives!" added the dark man.

"And yet *he* would not have done it, with a model, in a week."

"Neither do I believe you would, either," interjected the light man. "That face is an inspiration."

"That is exactly what the critics will say," supplemented the dark man.

"And give the artist credit for having painted his model to the life," laughed the artist.

"Undoubtely," rejoined the dark man. "But his fame will suffer nothing from the misapprehension. The work is there."

"That is true," corroborated the light man, enthusiastically. "It will carry the town by storm and immortalize the artist."

"There is little doubt of that," said the dark man, thoughtfully; and, after a pause, in a musing tone: "I wonder what the poor devil will say or think."

"That the spirits are at work, most likely," laughed the artist.

This was more than Sydney could endure. He had heard enough to convince him that there was a conspiracy on foot to assist him in finishing his picture, which was the dream of his life, and then stealing it away and profiting by his skill and inspiration. This was enough without the additional insult implied in the belittling epithet, "poor devil." But this latter served to call up and exaggerate all the persecutions and annoyances he had suffered at this man's hands, and the thought maddened him. He could contain himself no longer. Descending the ladder in one or two strides, he sprang at the door, hastily unfastened the padlock and flung it open.

As he did so, Livingstone's two companions hurried past him and vanished through the door before Sydney had time for a second thought, leaving the mysterious

artist at the easel—alone. The old gentleman had just emerged from the bedroom, and, as Sydney looked, was walking toward the artist at the easel, evidently mistaking him for Parkinson. Livingstone, meanwhile, had taken up the palette, poised the maul-stick, and calmly proceeded to work.

Parkinson was so incensed at the sight that he was on the point of flying at the impostor and attacking him, when the old gentleman came between them, and, apparently not noticing Sydney, addressed himself to the man at the easel.

"Howdy, Sydney?" he said. "I didn't know you'd got back."

"Yes," rejoined the other. "I did not remain out as long as I expected. I have just returned."

In spite of the rage the fellow's coolness caused him, Sydney could not help admiring his impersonator's obvious bravery in daring to enter his studio in broad daylight and to calmly stand there, when he must have known that he was in imminent peril of his life. And then Parkinson began to consider seriously whether the fellow was not demented. Surely no sane man would have ventured so much. Besides, he thought, what could be his motive? These bewildering thoughts, flashing, one after the other, through his mind, caused him to stay his hand, but when the impostor began to converse with his old friend, assuming his (Parkinson's) character, Sydney could restrain himself no longer, and made a move toward his double. But as he did so, Mr. Meredith turned, and, beholding Parkinson standing so close to him, grew livid with rage. He mistook him for Livingstone. It was the first time he had seen them together.

"Never mind," interjected the impostor, reassuringly. "Don't be afraid of him. He will do you no harm.

However, to put an end to this unpleasant business, Mr. Meredith, I 'll just step down and get an officer and have him arrested."

With that, and before Sydney could recover from his surprise sufficiently to interpose an objection, the fellow strode calmly out of the door and disappeared.

It was not until then that the artist recovered his presence of mind enough to move, and he dashed after his tormentor. But when he got into the hall, he found that the other had too much the start of him and had already, reached the foot of the stairs. Nevertheless he hastened down and reached the street in time to see his impersonator turn the corner, a block away. Sydney realized the futility of attempting to overtake him, and gave up the chase. The fellow's persistency satisfied the artist that he would have plenty of opportunities of meeting him, and so concluded to bide his time.

As he walked back to the studio, Sydney reflected upon the best mode of procedure. He knew the old man would expect him to return with an officer, and he must have ready an excuse for not fetching one. A moment's thought was sufficient for his purpose, and, assuming as calm a demeanor as possible, he ascended the stairs and entered the studio. Mr. Meredith, as he anticipated, was anxiously awaiting his return, and was evidently disappointed at seeing him alone.

"Where is the officer?" demanded he, eagerly.

"I saw no necessity for fetching one," replied Sydney, calmly, "inasmuch as you allowed that rascal to escape before I could procure one."

This was a master-stroke. It had the double effect of removing all suspicion from the old gentleman's mind regarding Sydney's identity, and of any intention on his part of shirking his duty.

Meredith looked crestfallen.

"I 'm very sorry, he murmured," but the fact is, he left so very suddenly that I had no time to detain him, even if my strength had been equal to it. But I do not know why I didn't throttle the rascal, or at least why I didn't have the presence of mind to demand Florence's whereabouts."

He paused, and his face grew pale and grave, while his lips quivered painfully.

Sydney laughed. He recalled that it was himself who would have received the choking, if any had been indulged in, and he could not refrain from laughing at the ludicrousness of the situation. The old gentleman stared at him in bewilderment, and Sydney hastened to explain.

"The man at the easel was not myself," he said. "That was my double."

"What!" shrieked Meredith. "Then the man whom I mistook for him was, in reality, you!"

"Certainly."

"And the one to whom I was talking, and who offered to fetch a policeman, was not you?"

"Of course not."

The old man shook his head dubiously.

"This beats all," he said. "And the impudence of the fellow to answer to your name and converse with me as though he were yourself, and that right in your presence!" And then he was suddenly struck with the drollness of the situation. "I say, my boy," he said, as soon as he could recover his gravity, "hadn't you better examine yourself and make sure of your own identity? I declare, even now I should hesitate before identifying you at a bank. But confound the fellow! Blessed if I don't admire his pluck, as well as his consummate effrontery. If he had not played us such a

scurvy trick in running off with Flory, I'll swear I could like the rascal !"

All of which eulogium was extremely distasteful to Sydney, who exhibited unmistakable signs of jealousy.

"That he is a rascal," he said, with a dark scowl "there can be not the shadow of a doubt, but I see nothing to commend him in that."

"But you must confess that he is a brave chap and a genuis."

"Granting all this, his bravery and genius do not offset his rascality."

"Possibly not," coincided Meredith, not wishing to provoke a quarrel, of which there appeared to be some danger in Sydney's present humor.

"But the thing that puzzles me," said the artist, with exceeding bitterness of tone, "is why he should persecute me thus—I, who have never injured him in the slightest degree. It was bad enough for him to blight my happiness by marrytng Florence, but that might be to some extent extenuated by the old adage that 'all is fair in love,' but what excuse can he offer for coming into my studio unbidden and working upon my picture ?"

"I declare, my boy," laughed the old man, "aside from the consummate impudence of the thing, I see nothing so very heinous about that. Bless my stars ! If a neighbor should slip over into my field and do my harvesting for me, and did it as well as I could do it myself, I 'd never quarrel with him for it."

"But, my dear sir, this is quite a different matter," said Sydney, impatiently. "An artist takes pride in his work, and when it is done he doesn't want to feel that whatever fame it brings him is due to another's genius. But that is not the worst of it."

"What do you mean ?"

Here was Sydney's opportunity, as he thought, of crushing out whatever germs of admiration might have been engendered in the old man's heart for Livingstone. He said:

"I mean that the three men are just so many conspirators, schemers, not only to rob us of Florence (they have accomplished that, however), but to snatch whatever laurels I have a chance of winning as an artist and appropriating them to themselves—or rather to this impersonator of mine."

"How do you know this?"

"From a conversation I heard between them."

"Where?"

"In this very room, not an hour ago."

"Impossible!" cried the old man, waxing a trifle nervous. "When could they have been in here—the other two, I mean?"

Sydney recounted the incident of his climbing up the ladder and overhearing the conversation between the conspirators. "Did you not hear anyone talking, Mr. Meredith?" he asked in conclusion.

"Yes," rejoined the other, "I heard some persons talking in here, and wondered who it could be. But when I got dressed and came out, no one was in sight, but yourself and your double. This does look a little suspicious, and it may be as you say; but it is difficult to imagine anything unmanly emanating from so brave a fellow as that."

Sydney bit his lip, but made no reply; and the old man felt at that moment that if he could have been certain that Florence was well and happy with her husband, he would not have hesitated an instant to give them his blessing.

CHAPTER XIV.

A CHANGE OF TACTICS.

Mr. Meredith breathed nothing of his transition of sentiment to his young friend, having already discovered that any complimentary or extenuating allusion to his rival was as wormwood to him, and the two friends soon after left the studio for dinner. Little conversation passed between them, each being absorbed in thought. Sydney, in particular, was unusually silent, even to moroseness.

Ten minutes later they seated themselves in a Broadway restaurant, and for some time both were, or appeared to be, absorbed in their evening papers. A close observer would have noticed, however, that neither was at his ease and less interested in his newspaper than in the subject of his own thoughts.

At length Sydney threw aside the paper with an impatient movement and glanced across at his companion. The latter was visibly glad of an excuse for doing the same thing, and looked up at the artist inquiringly.

"I have an idea," said Sydney.

"Well?" questioned the other, eagerly.

"Laying aside whatever difference of opinion we may have with regard to the real character of these in-

truders of ours, the wisest course we can take, in my opinion, is to employ a detective."

"I have been thinking of the same thing," responded Meredith. "That is what we should have done at first."

"He can, at least, relieve us of the worry," resumed the artist. "In the first place, I shall remove my picture to another studio, where this double of mine will not find it, and leave the detective to watch the old place. That will give me an opportunity to finish my picture in peace, and the detective can take his time about catching the rascals. I have a right to have them arrested for entering my studio by stealth."

"The idea is a good one," admitted Meredith, after some reflection. "But, in the meantime, about Florence?"

"I cannot see that we can do anything better than wait till we have this fellow—my double—in the toils. So long as he is a free man, inasmuch as he is legally married to her, we really have no right to interfere with his possession of her. But the moment he is under arrest, if we can then induce him to divulge her whereabouts, we may be able to persuade her to leave him, and, ultimately, get a divorce from him."

"My dear young friend, you astound me!" cried Meredith, sternly. "We have no means of knowing whether Florence is with him or not, much less that she is happy. If I could only be assured of this—"

Seeing that he was treading on dangerous ground again, he checked himself. But he had already said enough for Parkinson to catch his drift.

"If you could only be assured that she was contented and happy," he interposed, "you would be satisfied, in spite of the fact that she is married to a scoundrel, or, what is worse—"

But the quick, pained look which the old man darted on him caused him to stop.

"There can be no doubt as to the legality of the marriage," he said, in a husky voice, "even if this man did give an assumed name. My only concern is to find out whether he is treating her properly, and whether she, after discovering the deception practiced upon her (assuming that she has discovered it), is still content to be his wife. As for yourself, my boy, I feel deeply for you. But my greatest concern is to find my daughter; and that I will do if it takes every dollar I possess!"

Sydney bit his lip from vexation, but assuming the rôle at once of philosopher and martyr, he said:

"You may be right with regard to the marriage. I truly hope you are. It will save a good deal of trouble all round. But with regard to her being satisfied with her lot, there is no speculation about *that*, my friend."

"So you imagine."

"So I *know!*"

"How do you know it? How *can* you know it—when you have not seen her?"

"But I have seen her."

"What!" and the old man nearly bounded out of his chair. "How is it you never mentioned the fact before?"

"I did not consider it worth while, for one thing, and I knew it would only add to your worry. Listen and I 'll tell you all about it."

Sydney then recounted the incident of his wandering off toward the upper part of the city, of his meeting Florence, his attempt to approach her, and of her running away from him as soon as she recognized him.

"Do you think she would have done this," he ques-

tioned, in conclusion, "if she had not been satisfied with her lot with this man?"

The old man pondered the subject for some time before offering any response. Suddenly a light appeared to break in upon him. His countenance brightened up, his eyes twinkled, and he began:

"I have it! You are wrong in your theory. You forget that Florence is not aware of the fact that there are two of you, and when she espied you she mistook you for your double. That proves to me that she has left him. But I wonder she has not gone home. Heavens! Can it be possible that she has not enough money? My poor child in this great, wicked city with neither money nor friends! This is awful!" and the stricken old man buried his face in his hands and gave vent to his pent-up feelings.

Parkinson offered no consolation. Indeed, he had none to offer, for between his grief growing out of the possible loss of the laurels he had hoped to win with his painting and the bitterness of soul and wounded pride incident to the fact of another man defeating him in his fight for Florence's affections, there was too much self-interest at stake to admit of any great amount of sympathy for another.

At length Mr. Meredith raised his head and resumed in a more determined tone than he had ever before assumed:

"I must leave you to attend to the picture business, sir; my time and energies shall be devoted henceforth to finding my daughter. However," he continued, as he encountered Sydney's face, which was a picture of abject helplessness, "as I am going to Police Headquarters to put the case into their hands, it will be just as well for me to engage a detective to watch your studio."

On leaving the restaurant, the old gentleman took a downtown car, while Sydney returned to his studio. He at once set about gathering together such articles as he would need in his new quarters, not wishing to remove everything, as he had no notion of abandoning the place altogether. But he made little progress in his task, for two reasons: First, he felt a melancholy reluctance to quit the old place, where his best efforts had been put forth, even temporarily; and, secondly, he could not tear himself away from the image of his adored Florence which had so mysteriously sprung into his picture. Strive as he would to drive the recollection of it and her from his mind, some occult power seemed to chain his mind to one and his eyes to the other, and again and again he would find himself unconsciously before the enchanting likeness, impelled by a devotion akin to that of a devotee to a holy relic. And even when he would stubbornly turn his back upon it, as he did over and over again, he felt that the wonderful eyes were following him, and they would burn into his very soul, until he would be compelled to turn and look at the picture, when the spell would again seize him and draw him, as by magic, in front of it. Thus he went on for more than an hour, meanwhile scarcely making a start at his work, and each recurrence of the strange infatuation would terminate with a keen sense of self-condemnation for his weakness.

At length he could endure the torture no longer and determined to put an end to it. He would blot the maddening shadow from the canvas forever in the forlorn hope of obliterating the image of the original from his memory! To that end he grasped a brush and, dipping it into a mass of white paint, made a dash toward the easel. But as he raised the brush

to commit the terrible iconoclasm, a voice rang in his ear:

"Stop, madman, what would you do? Blight the wreath just ere it fall upon your brow? If you would be happy and great, neither mar nor remove the canvas until the picture is ready for the Exposition!"

Sydney let the brush fall to the floor.

It was the admonition of conscience, the voice of his own manhood remonstrating against his weakness, against his lack of heroism; for had he possessed this, the fair image on the canvas would have been his own instead of another's creation, and the divine original would also have been his.

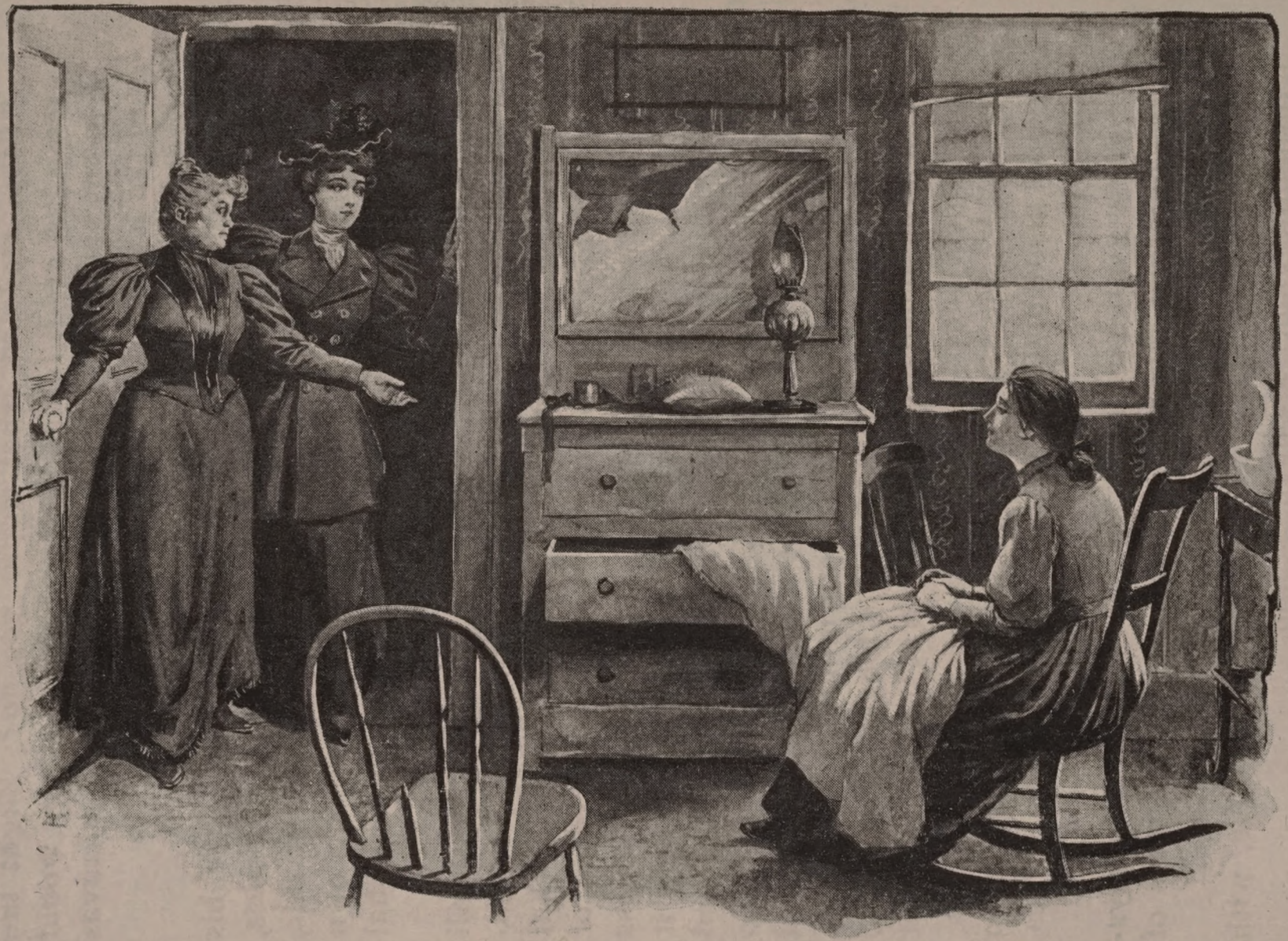
No one likes to see a true reflex of himself with all his littleness and pusillanimity, and the image of himself appeared so contemptible to Sydney Parkinson that it angered him more than the repeated recurrence of his own weakness or the sight of Florence's likeness had done. And as he turned once more and beheld it there, smiling at him from the canvas, he was incensed beyond endurance. It had suddenly become hateful to him, and the recollection of the subject loathsome and unbearable. Once for all he determined to obliterate the image, that it at least might no longer plague him. Again he snatched up the brush, but at that very instant there came a knock at the door.

He laid aside the brush and opened the door, when the old gentleman, followed by two burly detectives, walked in.

"These gentlemen think they can discover the mystery," observed Meredith, indicating the two limbs of the law.

"What 's it about the myst'ry?" growled one, with a disdainful glance about the studio.

Sydney related in detail the strange happenings of



"THIS IS MISS FORSYTHE, MRS.—MRS.—WHAT DID YOU SAY YOUR NAME WAS?"—*See Page* 101.

the past twenty-four hours, but avoiding the expression of any opinion as to the real character of the mysterious apparitions.

"That 's a purty ghost-story," growled one of the officers, with a dogged jerk of the head. "But I reckon them ghosts won't play no tricks on us."

"I hope not," said Sydney, slyly. "Nevertheless, I 'd advise you to look out for yourselves."

CHAPTER XV.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

An individual or an object never has a value until two or more persons want it. No man would buy an article which nobody else would have, and no woman wants a man whom no other woman cares for. This is the corner-stone of all fame—the kindling spark of all jealousy. When Florence saw the photograph of her husband in another woman's possession, and realized that he had loved, flattered and coddled another besides herself, she made two discoveries at one and the same moment. She discovered, first, that the man whom she had married was not quite such an object of disdain as she had imagined; and, second, that she possessed that which she never supposed she possessed, namely, jealousy. She knew that she did not possess it to any alarming degree, and she also knew that her heart glowed with enough of the sunshine of charity and sympathy soon to drive out whatever frost or mildew of jealousy might lurk there. So, after the transitory spasm which caused her to hate instead of to despise her perfidious husband, and to entertain a wee particle of bitterness for her rival, had passed, she felt her bosom warm with the same old sunshine again, and she despised him with the same vehemence and felt as kindly and sympathetic toward her as ever.

Florence did not take the girl into her confidence to the extent of telling her that the same man had been the author of both their misery. Her charity, broad as it was, did not extend quite that far. And perhaps her pride may have had something to do with it. So, assuming the rôle of a disinterested sympathizer, she took the bereaved girl to her heart, and proceeded to soothe her with such little touches of gentle solicitude as only a sweet, guileless nature like her own knows how to bestow.

"I shouldn't waste a thought on such a man if I were you, Fanny," she coaxed. "He isn't worthy of you. Besides, you are too young to blight your life with such trifles. Learn to forget him, and—and— I 'll tell you what!" she exclaimed, with sudden impulsiveness. "When my money comes, you shall go home with me! I know you will be happy there. We will have the whole great big house to ourselves, and we 'll be just like two sisters, and live for nothing but each other's happiness. We will roam the fields together and gather flowers, and you won't have to sew and toil for just a little bit of a room like this and a morsel to eat. Won't that be splendid? I never had a sister, and I know it will be just grand!"

The girl sat with distended eyes while Florence was delivering this enthusiastic harangue. She seemed unable to comprehend it all, and appeared to doubt whether she were not dreaming. She still sat with her great, hollow, wondering eyes upon the bright, ingenuous creature before her, and seemed to question whether there could really be so much unselfishness in this world. *She* had never encountered anything like it before. And then there came just one little cloud of skepticism. Was it possible—but no! This sweet creature could have no selfish motive. And if she had,

what could she hope to gain from this poor, starved, homeless outcast?

"You are very kind—very, very kind," she made out to falter at last. "I never thought there was anybody in this wicked world with half your goodness, Florence. You 're for all the world like the way they describe angels in books. Do you really and truly mean what you say?"

"Certainly I do, Fanny. I want you to come home with me, and we'll be, oh, so happy, and you won't have to sit by that dark, old window and sew all day long. And we 'll have a great big room all to ourselves, and we can open the window and let in the air and smell of the flowers and the songs of the birds, and we 'll go out into the orchard and gather our aprons full of big ripe apples. Won't that be jolly?"

"Oh, yes!" gasped the poor girl, with a half-delighted, half-doubtful look. "But, Florence, you don't mean that I shall share all this happiness, and—and—not pay board?"

"Pooh!" laughed Florence. "Nobody thinks of charging anything for anything in the country. Everybody has all he wants for a thank ye."

"Apples, too?"

"Everything. Besides, you are to be my sister, you know, and will have everything that I have."

The poor, worn face lighted up as it had not done for many a day, and for a brief moment the poor starved heart glowed with a warmth that it had been a stranger to for many weary years. But gradually the face grew hard again; the old lines of distrust and despair tightened, and the eyes dulled with the leaden film of skepticism.

"No," she murmured at last, "it won't do. You are very good to offer all this, but I know it won't do."

"Why not?" demanded Florence, with a note of impatience in her voice. "What is to hinder you?"

"Such happiness is not for me," murmured Fanny, dolefully. "I was never intended for the like. My place is in the city among the other sad creatures. I would only sadden your bright life with my sadness, and you would soon tire of me and wish I were away. And then, when I had to leave all that sunshine and happiness—and you—and come back to the old life again, it would be more bitter than ever."

"But you would cease to be melancholy there," pleaded Florence. "You would forget your sad weary life, and you would learn to laugh—great, big, out-door laughs, and your cheeks would grow rosy, and you would soon be as jolly as the rest of us. No, I know I should never grow tired of you, for I 'm sure I shall love you, and even if you were sick and peevish, I could sympathize with you, and my mamma would sympathize with you and soothe you, for I know that she would love you, too."

The girl began to waver. She was evidently delighted with the picture the innocent girl had painted, but she feared that it was only a gorgeous dream-picture and would soon melt away and leave the hideous reality more hideous than ever.

"I wish I knew," she at length faltered, "that—that you would not be mistaken in me. You do not know me, Florence. My nature is not like yours. I am melancholy and irritable, and then I have my bad days, when my head aches worse than usual, and my heart seems like a great lump of lead, and I hate everybody. I 'm sure you could not love me then."

Florence was about to reply, when there came a rap at the door, and the next moment the landlady put her head in and announced that Florence's room was ready,

and that if she was ready, she (the landlady) would show her to it. Florence whispered something in Fanny's ear that caused her to smile sadly and nod an affirmative, and then kissed the thin, colorless lips and bounded away. But she returned a moment later to gather up her little belongings, and again bidding Fanny good night, tripped out of the room.

None of this was lost on the wily landlady, and she took occasion to reprove Florence for what she considered her lack of discretion, on the way to her room.

"You 're making altogether too much of that girl, Mrs. Meredith," she insinuated. "You 'll live to regret it, mind my words. Put a beggar on horseback and he 'll ride to the Old Nick."

"But you are mistaken in Fanny," protested Florence. "I'm sure you are, Mrs. McQuade. There never was a gentler or more modest and grateful creature than she is."

"Gentle, I 'll warrant ye !" sneered the good woman. "Poverty 'll make a dog gentle ! Modest, yes. At least, she knows how to put it on. It 's the stock-in-trade of such as her. You take my advice, and have as little to do with her as possible."

Florence bit her lip to keep from saying something spiteful, for she never felt so much like it in her life. And then they arrived at the room, and the landlady opened the door and ushered her in, showed her where to put away her things, called her attention to several advantages the room had over the other, among which were its extreme size, its two windows which looked out upon the street, and several articles of furniture, which the landlady assured her were possessed by no other room in the house. The good lady then bade her an unctuous good-night and took herself off, much to the relief of the girl.

The room, it could not be denied, was a decided improvement over the other one. Indeed, for a boarding-house it was an exceptionally pleasant one. But Florence took very little time to examine it that night, for the fatigue of the previous night, coupled with the worry and excitement of the day, had prepared her for the soundest of slumber, and she lost no time in undressing and creeping into the great, wide, hard bed, where she soon fell into the sweet, gentle slumber known only to youth, health and innocence.

Florence was up the following morning as soon as the sun had climbed high enough over the dingy roofs to peep in at her window, and long before any one else was stirring in the house. After making her simple toilet, she sat by the window a long time watching the strange sights in the streets. It was all very novel to Florence, for, although she had often been in the city, she had stopped at the great hotels and nothing of the real life of the city was to be seen. Here she saw the early scavengers at work; she saw a wretched little woman with a swarthy complexion, with a bundle four times as large as herself on her head, and still delving into the rows of barrels that stood like sentinels along the curb for more. This gave Florence her first notion of the poverty and economy of the city, and she could not avoid contrasting it with the prodigality of the country. Then she saw a sprinkling-cart come lumbering and swishing along, flooding the hot, thirsty street with its cool crsytal drops, and in its wake romped and screeched a bevy of dirty urchins, bathing their bare, brown feet in the cool, gracious flood. Then came a procession of noisy milk wagons, butchers' carts and push-carts laden with vegetables; and throngs of peddlers of every description, with harsh, strident voices and unintelligible words, till Florence

began to think she was back in some European capital whose language was unknown to her. Presently a hand-organ, somewhere, mingled its creaking voice with the din. And then came a number of small boys with bundles of papers under their arms, bawling vociferously, but their words were equally unintelligible with the others. And then a poor, emaciated boy, with a shrunken leg, came hobbling along on a crutch, and he, too, carried a bundle of papers, but his voice was subdued and gentle. And as he got under the window he paused, rested his weak, weary body on the crutch and raised his great dark, sad eyes to the window, and when they met the sweet, sympathetic face there, a sad, beseeching smile played about the pale lips. Florence's heart went out to him, and she felt that she would like to do something for him, but she realized at that moment that she had given her last penny to the landlady. The thought vexed her beyond measure, and, spurred partly by vexation and partly by an uncontrollable impulse to befriend the poor creature in the street, she snatched off one of her rings, raised the window and flung the jewel to the astonished cripple.

The ring fell upon the edge of the curb and rolled into the gutter, whence it was quickly rescued by the boy. He turned it over in his dirty fingers and examined it wonderingly for some time, and then raised his eyes inquiringly to the window. Florence nodded and smiled, which caused the poor wretch to examine the jewel again and look extremely perplexed. At length, he again glanced up, and, in a doubtful tone, said:

"Fora me?"

Florence threw up the window and, still smiling graciously, replied:

"Yes, yes, it is for you! I have no money, or you should have that."

The poor fellow was puzzled, and after another careful scrutiny of the ring, looked up and said:

"Notta good?"

"Yes, certainly it is good," replied the girl, vexed with the question. "Of course it is good. Pure gold and real stones."

The boy shook his head dubiously.

"Whata for you give to me, if good? Me thinka no gooda."

Nevertheless he pocketed the jewel and hobbled away on his crutch, and Florence was angry enough to have shaken him if she had been near enough to him. But her anger was soon forgotten in the contemplation of the ever-changing panorama that passed before her.

At length the impulse to go out upon the street seized her, and she decided to take a walk. Donning her little walking-hat and her sacque, she slipped quietly out of the house and was soon on the street and mingling with the curious throng. She was a little disappointed from the first. The crowd was less picturesque at short range, and many of the faces were vicious or repulsive, and there was a damp, unhealthy smell arising from the wet street and the half-decayed garbage that lined the gutter, that gave her a sense of nausea. But she pushed on and on, and finally came to a large school. The children, in noisy throngs, were just beginning to assemble, and the girl stopped to watch the varied phases of humanity as pictured in the childish faces that came and went. There were sweet, innocent faces, such as belong to childhood; and pinched, hard and cynical ones, which indicated strife and privation and a too intimate knowledge with the wicked world. Then there were the stolid, well-fed and indifferent faces,

which reminded Florence of her father's "fattening hogs" at home. Presently she saw a tall, thin woman dressed in rusty black, with a pale, careworn face, pitiless eyes and thin, tightly-drawn, unsympathetic lips, and at her approach the children grew quiet and huddled together in half-frightened groups, so that Florence concluded she must be one of the teachers.

For a long time the girl stood watching the curious spectacle from the opposite side of the street, and so intent was she upon the object of her curiosity that she had become oblivious to her surroundings. And then suddenly she remembered where she was, glanced quickly about to see whether any one were watching her, and started to walk away.

But she had taken but a few steps, when, on chancing to glance ahead of her, her eyes encountered a sight that caused her to pause and her heart to stop its beating for an instant.

It was a man walking directly toward her, and she needed no second glance to tell her that it was her husband. At least, that is what she believed. As a matter of fact, as we already know, it was Sydney Parkinson.

As soon as their eyes met, a smile of recognition beamed in his face and he started toward her with outstretched hands, and then she regained her presence of mind and turned and fled with all the speed she could muster.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FRIENDS.

Florence hastened with all the speed she could muster back to the boarding-house, without once looking behind her. And for this very reason she imagined that her husband was at her heels the whole time, and expected every instant to feel his hand upon her arm, staying her flight. And it was not until she arrived on the stoop of the house, panting and half-fainting with fatigue and fright, that she plucked up sufficient courage to steal a hasty, nervous glance back over the course she had come. To her relief, there was nobody resembling her husband in sight, and she breathed easier for the moment. But she felt certain he would follow her, and she lost no time in ringing the bell and getting inside.

She said nothing to any one about her adventure, but the landlady and Fanny both noticed her unusual silence and preoccupation.

As soon as breakfast was over, and her room had been tidied up, Florence stole into Fanny's room. The girl was already busily occupied with her sewing, but Florence imagined she looked stronger and more cheerful than when she had seen her the night before.

Perhaps the enjoyment of two consecutive full meals had had something to do with this, for, prate about the heart and the soul as we will, the stomach plays an important part in our economy, and has more to do with our happiness than poetical folk would have us believe.

After a little conversation about such trifles as girls find interesting, Florence said:

"Fanny, I 'm going to ask a favor of you."

The girl looked up in great surprise, and instinctively laid her hand upon her lean purse.

"What is it?" she almost gasped, as though she feared the other were about to ask her for the loan of a dollar, which it would break her heart not to be able to grant.

"I want you to fetch your sewing and come into my room, dear," replied Florence, not noticing her painful apprehension. "It is more cheerful in there, and there 's a better light."

Fanny's expression changed, but not entirely for the better. There was still a look of pain, but it was that of a sensitive soul that feels that it is a burden upon a generous, kindly friend.

"You are very good, Florence," she said, in her half-frightened, diffident way, "but—but—"

"No excuses at all!" cried Florence, with characteristic impulsiveness. "I 'll take no excuses, for you have none—so there! Come right along!"

And in spite of the girl's feeble protests, Florence hustled her off into her room, sewing, work-basket and all.

"There!" exclaimed the enthusiastic benefactress, arranging a chair near one of the great windows. "I 'm sure you 'll be better off there. Sit down and make yourself comfortable."

Fanny, overwhelmed and embarrassed with this

new mark of Florence's generosity, managed to deposit her meager little body in the great easy-chair, in which she appeared lost, and then raised her big dark eyes, brimming with tears, to Florence's face. Her own face was a picture of gratitude, which she could find no words to express. Her pale lips quivered, and then, unable to speak, she burst into sobs. The next instant Florence was at her side and had the poor creature folded in her arms.

"You needn't try to tell me what you feel, dear, dear friend," coaxed the noble girl. "I know it all as well as you do. You want to thank me for the trifling things I 've done for you, and your poor, overflowing heart will not let you. But, dear, if you knew the happiness it gives me, you wouldn't feel half so thankful. You would say the gratitude should be on the other side, and that I am a perfectly selfish thing, after all."

"No, no, don't say that, Florence !" protested Fanny, between her sobs. "You couldn't be selfish if you tried. You are too good and generous. I do not know how a miserable wretch like me ever came to have such a dear, good friend. I 'm sure I don't deserve it."

"And I am just as sure you do, Fanny !" cried Florence, soothingly, brushing the hair back from her forehead with a gentle hand. "You do yourself a great injustice in speaking in that way. You feel that way because you have been mistreated and neglected until you 've come to think you don't amount to anything. But when we get out to my beautiful home in the country you 'll feel differently. You 'll get well then, and will have no more melancholy spells. Oh, how hot your head is, dear !" she interjected, suddenly, as she passed her soft hand across the girl's brow. "Are you ill ?"

"My head aches a little, that's all," replied Fanny,

indifferently. "But that's nothing. I 'm so used to it, I don't mind it any longer."

"Let me stroke it," said Florence, suiting the action to the word. "I often soothe mamma's headache in that way."

And for the next few minutes she set up such a friction on the girl's forehead that the blood mounted to her temples, her eyes took on a dreamy expression, and the hard lines of the face relaxed into a soft, sensuous languor.

"That will do, please," Fanny murmured, drowsily, at length. "It makes me awfully sleepy."

"Is the pain gone?" questioned Florence, ceasing her rubbing and stepping out in front of the girl.

"Oh, yes. There isn't a bit of pain any longer, but, oh, how sleepy I feel! Your touch is so soothing! I never felt anything like it."

"That is the magnetism," explained Florence. "They say I have a great deal of magnetism, and that it 's a sign of good health. Your drowsiness will soon pass away, dear. Let me raise this window. It 's rather warm in here. There," she ran on, after having shoved the window up. "The draught won't be too much on you, will it? Perhaps I 'd better put a shawl about your shoulders?"

"Oh, no, thanks," replied the other. "I 'm very comfortable, and this is such a delightful place to work. I 'm sure I shall be able to do twice as much here."

"I 'm sure you will, dear. But why not put away your sewing for to-day, and let us just sit and talk?"

"Oh, dear, that would never do!" declared Fanny, taking up her work, as though the last remark had been an admonition for her to renew her labor. "I must finish this dress for the lady by Saturday night so as to get the money."

"But I shall have plenty of money soon, dear," protested Florence, "and you shall have all you want without wearing your poor fingers out to earn it."

"You are very good, my dear, but it would be mean and selfish for me to remain idle and use your money. I would feel like a beggar. Besides, this work is promised."

"Then, of course, it must be finished. But won't you let me help you, dear?"

"Oh, no; you could do me no good. Besides, your fingers are too soft and white for such work."

"Not at all," scouted the proud girl. "Indeed, I do lots of sewing at home."

"Anyway, you could help me none on this work," still objected Fanny. "Besides, I would rather have you talk to me. Your voice is just like music, and it seems so good to have some one with me who takes an interest in and sympathizes with me. It seems as if I had suddenly stepped out of a dungeon into the bright sunshine. You went out for a walk this morning, didn't you, dear?"

"Yes, for a short walk," faltered Florence, coloring. "But—but—you see, I 'm used to rising so early when in the country, and when I got up this morning and found that everybody was in bed yet and there was so much stir on the street, I thought I would be glad to get out. But it wasn't very nice, after all."

"No, it 's not nice out early in the morning. I know that from long experience. I used to have to start to the store sometimes before it was fairly light. That was when it was winter-time. And sometimes it was raining or snowing, and I can tell you it was anything but pleasant."

"It must have been a dreary life," apostrophized Florence.

"Yes, it was—a little. But it was much better than sitting cooped up in a little room like the one in there all day long, and then not knowing whether you were to have anything to eat or not. Ah me!"

"But those days are over for you now, dear. When you get out on the farm you won't need to get up till you just feel like it, and then you can go down to a nice warm breakfast in a nice warm room. And then we 'll go out sleigh-riding, and, oh, what fun we shall have!"

Fanny shook her head sadly, and the old cloud of doubt would assert itself. And then, as if anxious to shut her eyes to a picture which she feared was too bright to be real, she asked quickly:

"Was that the reason you looked so worried and sad when you came back this morning? I mean, because you did not find it pleasant?"

"Ye–yes—that was the reason," faltered Florence, flushing again.

But Fanny was too intent upon her work to notice her agitation, and went on:

"I was afraid that something had happened, you looked so depressed and were so silent after you came back."

"No, nothing," hesitated the girl. "That is—nothing."

There had been a little struggle with herself, and she had been on the point of yielding. But she finally decided that it would not be the part of wisdom to divulge her secret to her companion. It would open her poor wounds afresh, not to say harrow up her own feelings, and, there was no telling, possibly throw a little chill upon the friendship that had sprung up between them. So she made an effort to get away from the subject, but before she had fairly started in that direction Fanny broke in with:

"Don't you ever intend to live with your husband, Florence?"

The question startled Florence. Coming so close upon the heels of the last question, it seemed that the girl must know something of her secret. But perhaps it was a mere coincident, and that for the first time in her life Florence dissembled. She affected to feel no concern in the matter, laughed at the girl's question, and answered:

"No, certainly not. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing," returned Fanny, without raising her eyes from her work. "Only it seems so funny to be married and not live with your husband. I know *I* should—if I were married."

"That depends upon circumstances, maybe. If you did not love him—if the very sight of him was repugnant, hateful to you, I don't believe you would."

"Is he really repugnant to you, Florence?" questioned the girl, simply.

"Yes. I cannot bear to be in his presence."

"And yet you once loved him, and engaged yourself to him—and married him?"

"Yes, I did all these, and yet, as I told you, it was against my inclination that I married him."

"What happened to change your mind so?"

"Nothing, so far as I know."

"Didn't have any quarrel or anything?"

"Never."

"And he was always good and kind and gentle?"

"No one could be more so."

Fanny raised her eyes to Florence's face and seemed to study it curiously for a minute or so, and then, returning them to her work again, murmured, as if to herself:

"That's funny."

"It is strange," admitted Florence, the color mounting to her cheeks again. "I do not understand it myself. All I know is that he did not seem to be the same man when he came back, and I could not endure him, strive as I would."

"Maybe—" ventured Fanny, and then checked herself.

"What were you going to say, dear?"

Fanny broke out into a little laugh—it was the first time Florence had ever heard her laugh.

"I was about to say—but you would think it so absurd—that—that maybe he was *not* the same man."

"That *is* absurd," retorted the other. "At the same time," she went on in a more thoughtful tone, "I have almost had the same suspicion myself. Of course, it couldn't be so, or I should have known the difference. One man could not pass himself off for another, even if they looked exactly alike. But, somehow, my heart told me that he was not the same."

"Although he looked the same?"

"Yes—exactly."

"Then I 'll tell you what I think about it. Did you ever read a story of Balzac's called 'The Avatar?'"

"No."

"Well, it tells about a man who was madly in love with a beautiful countess, but the countess was already married, and his love was all for nothing. But his passion was not the least cooled by the discovery that she was married, and he was on the point of dying for love. Finally, after all the other doctors had given him up, he was recommended to this Avatar, or Hindoo doctor. The Avatar questioned him, and, when he found out what was the matter with the patient, he told him that there was but one recourse, and that was to change his soul into the body of the countess's husband. Of

course, the patient laughed at the doctor, but finally agreed to try it, provided they could lure the count into the doctor's place. They finally managed to do this. The change was made, and the young man—that is, his soul—with the count's body, went to the count's hotel and met the countess. At first she did not notice the difference, but she hadn't been in his presence but a few minutes when her heart told her that he was not the same, and she ran away and locked herself in her room. Now, I 'll bet anything that this is something of the same kind."

Florence screamed with laughter.

"Oh, you silly creature!" she laughed. "Do you put any faith in such ridiculous yarns?"

"It does seem funny how it could be," admitted Fanny, demurely. "But how else do you explain the mystery of your dislike for this man?"

"I don't pretend to explain it, but I shouldn't think of attributing it to any such nonsense as that."

CHAPTER XVII.

A PERPLEXED DETECTIVE.

Sydney's last remark caused the detectives, stolid and indifferent as they were, no little uneasiness. They glanced at each other inquiringly, shrugged their shoulders and grunted. They then went to work searching the premises for a clue to the mystery.

It did not take them long to go over the place, including the two smaller rooms, after which they went out into the hall and began an investigation of that. There was a heap of rubbish piled up in one corner, and they hauled that out and spent half an hour in searching behind it and sounding the wall.

Sydney and the old gentleman followed them about wherever they went, silently watching their movements. Finally, having satisfied themselves in this direction—although the artist could not imagine what they had gained, or had hoped to gain, by this part of the investigation—they returned to the studio.

"Wal," growled one of the detectives, "there ain't nobody hidin' 'bout here now, that's certain. D' ye say ye heard some one speak?"

"Yes," replied the artist, "as plainly as I hear you now."

The detective turned to his companion and winked broadly.

"Wal, I reckon if any one comes 'round tryin' to play spook on us they'll find the darbies on 'em, too, quick. Eh, Jimmy?"

His companion grunted an affirmative, and then Sydney said:

"We'll leave you men in charge for the night, and I hope you may succeed in catching the intruders by the time we see you again."

"Be sure o' dat, if dey comes our way," said the detective, boastfully. "We never misses; see? By de way, wot kind of a lookin' chap is dis udder artis' yer tell about?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you about that," said Sydney. "He is the very image of myself."

"W'at! Looks jes' like yer?"

"Precisely."

"All right," returned the detective, with a chuckle, which indicated that he thought he had got into a rare crowd of some sort. "We'll take keer of 'im if he shows up."

Mr. Meredith and Sydney then left the studio and made their way into the St. Denis, where they purposed stopping for the night.

"It pains me sorely," murmured the old gentleman, as they walked along, "that I have made no better headway toward finding Florence. I see now my folly in not putting the case into the hands of the police at once."

"That would undoubtedly have been the better course," responded Sydney. "Still, it is not too late yet. Florence is a sensible girl, and it is not likely that any harm has come to her. As I have the detectives to look after the studio now in my absence, you may as

well devote all your time to finding her. You put her case into the hands of the police, I suppose?"

"Yes, and, in addition, inserted an advertisement in the 'Personal' columns of a number of the morning papers. If Florence will only think of looking in the 'Personal' columns, my task will soon be at an end. But the poor girl may not be in a position to get a paper in the morning. God help and protect her!"

As the two men entered the hotel lobby, a well-dressed stranger, whom Sydney had never seen before, rushed forward, grasped his hand warmly and said:

"How are you, Bernard, old boy? Found your wife yet?"

Sydney was so taken aback that he did not know how to answer at first. His first impulse upon recovering his self-possession was to keep up the illusion, but despondency had driven about all the humor out of him, and he responded:

"I beg your pardon, sir, but you have made a mistake. My name is not Bernard Livingstone."

"Nonsense!" cried the other, laughing. "You needn't try to fool an old fellow like me. Come, have a drink, and tell me about your troubles."

"I am obliged to you, sir," returned Sydney, growing confused, "but I do not care to take anything, and I tell you again that I am not Livingstone. Here is my card," he pursued, handing him the article in question.

The stranger took the card, examined it critically, and then stared at the artist in stupefied amazement.

"I am not surprised that you should have mistaken me for that gentleman," resumed Sydney. "I am frequently mistaken for him and he for me."

"By Jove!" gasped the other, getting his breath at last. "This is most remarkable! If you are not Liv-

ingstone, I never saw two individuals so nearly alike in all my life."

"The resemblance is rather striking—distressingly so sometimes. You are intimately acquainted with this man?"

"Like brothers. Why, we roomed together for two years in the Quartier Latin, Paris, and shared our last crust with each other."

"What sort of a man is he?" interposed the old gentleman, who had been listening eagerly.

"The grandest fellow that nature ever succeeded in licking into form. Why, Bernard is one of the salt of the earth."

"Wouldn't be guilty of a mean act?" resumed Meredith.

"'A mean act?'" echoed the stranger. "Why, my old friend, you might as well ask me if the Venus de Milo can play billiards. No, sir, Bernard Livingstone could no more be guilty of a pusillanimous—or as we say out West, an ornery—trick than he could swallow Grace Church over there."

Sydney bit his lip with rage.

"May I have a word with you in private, sir?" said Meredith.

"With pleasure."

Excusing themselves from Parkinson, who appeared to have suddenly lost all interest in the matter, the two men seated themselves on one of the lobby sofas, and the old gentleman began:

"My name is Meredith—"

"Not the father of Bernard's wife?" interposed the stranger.

"Yes," rejoined the old man. "He has told you about it, then?"

"Yes, he told me that he had married a charming

girl whom he had met in Europe. Indeed, it was not the first time I had heard about her. It seems he met her in Germany and travelled with her family through Switzerland, and when he came back he was never done raving over her, and had his studio lined with pictures of her which he sketched from memory. So she is your daughter ?"

"She is. But you mentioned something about finding her. Tell me, has she left him ?"

"So it seems, and the poor old boy is distracted about it, and is taking his revenge by playing pranks on some chap who he imagines is responsible for it. Bernard always was a grim jester. He is never so ready for a mad prank as when his great heart is bursting with anguish."

"He does not know what has become of his wife, does he ?" asked the old man, eagerly.

"No—that's the worst of it. They had just arrived in the city ; he left her at their flat, and on his return he found that she had disappeared, and he has seen or heard nothing of her since."

"Is he making any serious efforts to find her ?"

"I believe he is, although I haven't seen him since the day following her disappearance."

After some further conversation on the subject, Mr. Meredith took leave of the stranger and rejoined Sydney.

"There is still hope for you, my boy," he said, when they had reached their room. "The fact that she has deserted Livingstone proves that her love is stronger for you."

"How can that be when she is not aware of there being two of us ?" inquired Sydney, grimly.

"She may not know that there are two of you, but, as I told you while we were out at Jonesboro, she has

a premonition—an instinctive knowledge of it. Her heart tells her what her eyes refuse to convey."

"Oh, that I could be sure of this!" moaned Parkinson, still skeptical.

"Oh, that I knew where to find her!" responded the stricken father, huskily. "Something tells me that I shall never see my poor child again!"

And so engrossed was his companion in his own selfish sorrow that he had not one word of condolence for his friend, and the poor old man was left to grieve in silence, uncomforted by the divine balm of sympathy.

It was not far from midnight when they retired, and, in spite of the weight of trouble and anxiety on his mind, Sydney found no trouble in getting to sleep, and did not awake till about eight o'clock the next morning. He arose at once, and, seeing that his friend was awake, proposed that they go for a walk before breakfast.

"The air will do us good," pleaded the young man. "Besides, I have something in view."

"I should like nothing better," rejoined his friend. And they were soon dressed and on the street.

"We will take the stage as far as Fiftieth Street," suggested Sydney, at the same time hailing one of those vehicles.

"Why, I thought you intended to walk?" objected Meredith.

"We shall have plenty of walking before we return."

They mounted the top of the stage and rode to Fiftieth Street, and, alighting at this point, walked east as far as the school.

"What are you going to do here?" queried the old man, curiously.

But before Sydney had time to answer, his attention was directed to a slender, poorly-clad woman, with a

pale face and large, black eyes, who was approaching from the opposite direction, and eying him intently. Sydney appeared puzzled at her conduct, but concluding that she was some poor, demented creature, or else some woman under the influence of liquor, was about to walk past without noticing her, when she stepped deliberately in front of him and, looking him straight in the eyes till her own black orbs seemed to be burning into his soul, began in a hoarse guttural :

"Oh, no, you don't run away from me, sir, until I have told you what I have to say about you !"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STRANGE CHARGE.

As soon as the woman began to speak in this wild fashion, Sydney made another effort to get past her. But again she thrust herself in front of him, and repeated the words:

"Oh, no, you don't! You ran away from me once, after pledging eternal devotion, and now I propose to hold you here and give you an opportunity to see the result of your treachery. Look at this pallid face! You used to say it was beautiful. Look at these hollow, lusterless eyes! You used to compare them to the stars that stud the heavens. See this thin, emaciated form, shrunken to a mere skeleton by sheer want and disease! You used to compare it to Venus Borghese. All this you have wrought by your treachery and neglect, and now you would spurn me as a loathsome thing, simply because I was fool enough to believe your flattering words once. You would strut past me and affect not to know me, and yet I still love—adore—worship—"

"Come, Sydney," cried the old gentleman, impatiently, clutching the young man's arm, "let us get past. The poor creature is crazy or drunk."

By sheer force of his companion rather than his own

volition, Sydney was hustled away, and finally succeeded in getting past the woman. But she was determined that he should hear more of what she had in store for him, for she shouted after him, albeit in a weak, tremulous voice :

"Run, then, snake that you are, Bernard Livingstone ! Console yourself with one thought—that, although you have broken your vows, there is one woman that still loves you, with all your infamy. Remember that Fanny still adores you, in spite of your cruelty !"

There was a wail of despair in her words that was very pathetic, and the old gentleman was deeply moved. Nevertheless, believing her to be some poor lunatic, they did not care to remain where she was, especially Sydney, whom she had chosen as a target for her reproaches, and who was so much affected that when his companion glanced at him a few minutes later he found him pale and agitated.

"Only some poor, harmless lunatic," observed the old gentleman, by way of reassuring him ; "but she evidently mistook you for some one else."

"There is no doubt about it," returned Sydney, shrugging slightly and his face clouding with a shade of annoyance. "If there were, her use of the name Bernard Livingstone would be sufficient to convince me that the poor creature is another victim of this wily scoundrel, my double."

Mr. Meredith groaned, but made no reply.

"I have no doubt," pursued the artist, "that we shall find no lack of human wrecks along the fellow's course, once we get into it. But come, we haven't breakfasted yet, and I am half famished. Let us get back to the restaurant."

The old gentleman complied mutely, and in another half hour they were downtown. They went to the St.

Denis restaurant and ordered breakfast. Both men had been rendered exceedingly gloomy by their late experience, and were accordingly abstracted and silent for some time after seating themselves at the table. But at length Meredith broke the silence. With one stroke the old man's good opinion of Livingstone was swept away.

"I have never until this morning," he said, "thoroughly comprehended the real character of this man with whom we have to deal. I am satisfied now that he is an unconscionable scoundrel and cheat, and, I have no doubt, has been the ruin of many innocent girls. The thought of Florence being in his power almost distracts me; but I presume he has succeeded in making her believe him one of the most charming and noble men that ever existed. But," he went on, with a sudden ray of hope, "my fondest hope is that his friend's statement that she has left him may be true."

"I do not doubt that Florence believes him to be what he represents himself," rejoined Sydney, despondently, "otherwise she would make some effort to escape from him. And, now that I think of it, I conclude that she must have left him, and mistook me for him the other morning, as you suggested; otherwise there could be no reason for her running away from me as she did. It is a terrible thing to be the prototype of such a rascal."

"Indeed it is. And there is but one way in which I can account for your remarkable resemblance."

"What is that?" questioned the artist, with a faint show of interest.

"That you are related."

"Nonsense!" cried the young man, with a look of disgust.

"I may be wrong," persisted the other, "but from the name and, now that I recall it, the likeness, I believe that he is the son of either Roderick or Marmaduke Livingstone, who used to live in my part of the country. These two men were twin brothers and deadly enemies, and Marmaduke finally killed his brother. I remember that they had sons who were the same age and who were the exact image of each other—"

"You don't mean to say that you believe me to be one of these sons?" interposed Sydney, indignantly.

"I don't say that," answered the old gentleman, slightly confused; "but I do believe him to be one of them. And—and—might not you be a—a—say a cousin?"

"I do not believe it. Above all, I should dislike to believe it, even if there was any evidence to that effect."

Seeing that the subject was distasteful to his friend, Meredith dropped it, and silence ensued to the end of the meal.

As soon as breakfast was finished they started to return to the studio. As they drew near to it, Sydney suddenly broke forth in a quiet laugh and said:

"I wonder how our detectives have got on with the ghosts?"

"I was thinking of the same thing," laughed his companion.

"If those fellows happened in upon the detectives, they will have a harrowing story to tell, I doubt not."

But upon their arrival at the studio they were surprised to find the two detectives sitting there, calmly smoking a couple of pipes belonging to the artist, and exhibiting no sign of having passed through any terrorizing ordeal whatever. On the contrary, they appeared to be feeling pretty comfortable, with which

the presence of a bottle and a couple of glasses may have had something to do.

"Well, did you see anything of the mysterious visitors during our absence?" asked Sydney.

"They've hardly had time, I should say," replied one of the men, with a supercilious grin.

"Haven't had time?" ejaculated the artist. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that they ain't had time, that's all," growled the detective.

"Well, I should say they had had time to pay you several visits since we left here last night."

"Oh, they've had time to come since then," muttered the fellow. "What I thought yer meant was since yer went away a while ago."

"Since we went away a while ago?" cried Sydney, astonished. "We haven't been here since we left last night."

"Both on ye haven't, that's a fact," grinned the detective, "but you have, yer know."

"I tell you that I have not been in this studio since I left last night!" persisted Sydney, stoutly.

The fellow indulged in a low, sardonic chuckle.

"Then it was yer ghost, I reckon," he said.

The truth dawned upon Sydney.

"Has anybody really been here?" he asked, eagerly.

"You've been here," muttered the detective, "an' a couple of porters, an' I reckon yer haven't forgot that?"

"I was here with a couple of porters?" exclaimed the artist, waxing apprehensive. "What did I want with the porters?"

The fellow chuckled again and, jerking his head inferentially in the direction of the easel, said:

"Wal, you *air* short-minded."

Sydney glanced in the direction, and his heart sank —his picture was gone!

"Heavens!" he groaned. And then turning upon the detectives, he raved: "You stupid asses, why did you let them take my picture?"

"What!" shrieked the old man, hysterically. "Have they taken the picture?" at the same time running toward the empty easel.

It was not until then that the stupid detectives began to get it through their heads that a blunder had been committed somewhere, and they started to their feet and stared helplessly first at the artist, then at the old gentleman and then at each other.

"D'ye mean ter say that it wasn't you that come an' took the pictur'?" faltered one, at last.

"Of course it was not! And that was the very thing that I wanted you to guard against."

The two detectives were thorougly awake to the realization of what they had done now, and were stupefied in consequence. Neither appeared able to summon courage to speak for some time, but at length one of them faltered:

"How was we to know it wasn't you? He was the very pictur' of yer!"

"Nevertheless, you should have satisfied yourselves that it was I, and not somebody else, before allowing him to take the picture away. The chances are that I shall never see it again, in which case I shall hold you responsible."

"Oh, we 'll find it for yer," promised one. "Don't have no fear on that score. We 'll never let no grass grow under our feet till we find that picture."

"I hope you may succeed," rejoined Sydney, dejectedly, "and you may as well start upon your mission now."

"Don't yer want us to stay here and watch no longer?" questioned one.

"What is there to watch?" growled Sydney.

"Watch fer the feller that—"

"And let him carry off the studio, if he chooses?" interposed the artist sullenly. "No, you can do no good here. If you think there is a shadow of a chance of finding my picture, start at once."

The two detectives silently left the studio.

"Thank God!" murmured Sydney, as the door closed behind them. "We are rid of those idiots anyway! And I believe if we hadn't had them here Livingstone would never have taken the picture away."

"What makes you think so?" inquired the old gentleman, who had been a silent and horrified spectator up to this time.

"Because the fellow wanted to show us what chances he was willing to run in order to palm himself off on people as myself."

"What are you going to do now, my boy?"

"I do not know," replied Sydney, hopelessly. "I shall try to find my picture, although it will be of little use to me, as the exhibition will open in another week, and there is little hope of recovering my picture in time for the hanging. If this rascal has started in to ruin me he has succeeded phenomenally. It was not enough that he should take away the one being of all the world that I loved, but he must needs add another drop to my cup of bitterness by depriving me of the opportunity of winning a little fame for myself. It matters little to me now what I do or what becomes of me."

"Do not despair, my boy," pleaded the old man, reassuringly. "All may be well yet."

"What hope is there?" cried Sydney, despairingly. "Here we have been searching in vain for Florence

for more than a week and are no nearer success than when we commenced. And now my picture is gone."

"Nevertheless, we may find both when we least expect it. Don't give up yet. I, as a father, have as much cause for grief at the loss of Florence as a daughter as you, as a lover, have for her as a prospective bride, and yet I do not despair."

"And for good reason," moaned the disconsolate lover. "She will always be your daughter, no matter what befalls her, but if she is already married to this fellow she can be nothing to me, even if we should succeed in finding her."

After another silence Meredith suggested:

"Had we not better go to the police headquarters and report the matter?"

"Yes," returned the artist promptly, rising. "Let us go at once. We have delayed this matter too long already.'

CHAPTER XIX.

HEART-PANGS.

The following morning Florence took another early walk. Fanny went to her room at a much earlier hour than she was in the habit of stirring out of her own room, and, finding her friend absent, divined the cause and went in search of her. Failing to find her, Fanny returned to the house, only to find that Florence had preceded her by several minutes. The girl hastened at once to Florence's room, and dragging herself in, pale, agitated and weak, sank into a chair. Here she buried her face in her hands and burst into sobs.

Florence was perplexed, but, touched with pity and guessing that Fanny had one of her fits of despondency, hastened to her side, put her arms about her, and strove to console her.

"Don't cry, dear!" she cooed. "I know your poor heart is sore, but you must cheer up, for all will be well in the end."

But Fanny's only response was a fresh burst of sobs, while the poor, wasted form was convulsed with emotion.

"There! There!" coaxed Florence, in soothing

tones. "Don't cry, dear heart, but tell sister all about it. If you have any sorrows, unburden your heart to me and let me share them with you."

But it was a long time before the stricken girl could speak, and when she managed to control her emotions enough to do so, her first words were:

"Oh, Florence, I have seen him! I have seen him! And the heartless creature strutted past me and affected not to know me, as though I was some loathsome thing beneath his contempt."

"Whom do you mean, dear?" questioned Florence.

"Bernard!" sobbed the girl. "Oh, that any one should be so cruel when he knows how dearly I love him! I do not see how there can be such people."

Florence's heart came into her mouth, and if Fanny could have seen her face at that moment, she would have wondered why it had suddenly grown so pale and why her lips twitched so painfully. The noble girl controlled her feelings, however, and after allowing a little time to elapse in order that there might be no indication of emotion in her voice, she asked:

"Where did you see him, dear?"

"Only a little way from here—near the schoolhouse."

Florence had to swallow a lump in her throat before she could speak this time, but with a heroic effort she managed to clear her voice, and said in the same soothing tone:

"Never mind, deary. I wouldn't grieve the least little bit for him. He isn't worth it. Forget all about him, and pretty soon we shall go to the country, and then we shall be very happy."

"But I cannot forget him!" sobbed Fanny. "He is the only man I ever loved, and the only one that ever pretended to love me. It is impossible for me to forget him."

"But you will learn to forget him when we get away from this wretched place. The fields and the flowers and the bright sunshine will cause you to forget him, and then you will be very happy."

"No, no, Florence, dear!" she wept, broken-heartedly. "You are very kind and would like to make me happy; but I shall never be happy again—I am sure of it."

"That is because you are sad and broken-hearted now, and, besides, you are not well," Florence went on, stroking the poor, aching head. "You've a fever again. Let me stroke your head. There, you will soon be better now."

Fanny ceased her weeping by degrees, and fell into a half dreamy state as her friend continued to chafe her forehead. And Florence likewise lapsed into silence, and her thoughts turned upon her strange experience of the past few days. She had gradually grown oblivious to her surroundings, when she was suddenly awakened from her reverie by Fanny's speaking up:

"Have you already learned to forget your husband, Florence?" she asked, with her usual simplicity.

The question caused Florence to start as if she had suddenly awakened out of a slumber.

"Why, no—that is," she faltered, "I haven't exactly forgotten him, although you know I never loved him. That is, not when I married him. I—I—but let us go down to breakfast, dear. I had forgotten it was so late."

At the suggestion Fanny arose, and the two friends descended to the dining-room. It was considerably past the regular breakfast hour, and the meal, never the most toothsome, was cold and uninviting enough on this occasion. But there was one satisfaction, they were spared the usual stares and ogling from the ill-

mannered male boarders. And then the landlady came in and asked about the young ladies' health, which contributed nothing to their comfort, as they would have preferred to have been left to themselves.

"I thought you must be sick," she said, "or else you 'd 'a' been down sooner. I was just on the point of coming up to see what was the matter."

Florence made some excuse for their lateness, and managed in a delicate, inoffensive manner to give the landlady to understand that she and her friend would prefer to be left alone, and the meal was partaken of, for the most part, in silence.

When the girls returned upstairs there appeared to be a tacit understanding between them that each would rather be alone for the time being, and Fanny went to her own little room and Florence to hers. As soon as she had closed the door upon herself Florence threw herself across her bed and gave vent to her pent-up feelings in weeping. It was the first time during all this long and terrible ordeal that she had exhibited any weakness. She had maintained up to that time a calm and firm resistance which was positively heroic, but the strain had been too much for her, and she was compelled to yield, temporarily, at least.

Perhaps Fanny's account of what she had seen had had something to do with it. It could not be jealousy. Florence would have repudiated the idea that she entertained the least shadow of jealousy, or that she even entertained the least affection for the man who had been the cause of her and her friend's unhappiness. Aud yet, as she lay there weeping, she could not avoid recalling his handsome face, of a certain winning smile which she had often thought belonged to no other man and, strive as she would to drive them from her, certain gentle and gracious expressions of his would persist in

ringing in her ears. And then—and she upbraided herself a moment later for her vanity—the thought would obtrude itself : What had he seen in the plain, pinched little face of Fanny to admire? But upon the heels of this came the aggravating thought that perhaps the girl had not always appeared starved and pitiful. Perhaps her face had been rosy and her eyes bright and winsome when he had first met her ; and at this moment there did intrude into her gentle heart a slight twinge of bitterness, and, for a brief moment, she felt that she hated him and despised her rival. But it was only transitory, and the succeeding moment Florence realized her own weakness, spurned the thought from her, and, springing to her feet, quickly dried her eyes and fortified her heart with the determination never to yield to the unworthy weakness again.

Nerved with this new resolution, she bathed her face in order to remove all traces of weeping, resumed her wonted cheerful countenance and hurried away to Fanny's room. Her principal object in visiting Fanny at this time was to console the poor, heart-broken creature, whom she expected to find in tears, but, to her utter astonishment, she discovered her not only tearless but in a more cheerful mood than she had ever seen her, and was even humming a little air as she stitched away.

This was a glad surprise, and Florence's heart glowed with pleasure as she ran to the girl's side and kissed her.

"I am so delighted to see you looking so happy and contented, dear," she cried, enthusiastically. "But come, you must go into my room, where the light is better and it is more cheerful. I don't see how you came to stick yourself in here again."

In the ecstasy of her enthusiasm she forgot that she

had neglected to invite her friend to her room before. Fanny had taken no offense at it, however, for now that the invitation was extended, she arose promptly and accompanied her friend.

When they had reached Florence's room and she had seated Fanny in the easy-chair by the window, where the sun came in and lent a tinge of color to the pale face and lit up the bright colors of the goods upon which she was at work, Florence seated herself upon a low stool at her side, as was her wont, and, looking up into the faintly-smiling face, repeated her exclamation of exultation :

"I am so delighted to see you looking so happy, dear! It does my heart good. I am sure you will soon forget your troubles and get well, and then when we get out into the country you will learn to be very happy."

"Yes," rejoined Fanny, with a half-smothered sigh, "I do feel happy—happier than I ever expected to be. And how could I help but be happy with all your goodness and sunshine? But that is not the whole reason for my happiness. I have been thinking over what you said to me, and have decided to put him out of my mind, as you have done, and I believe I shall succeed—as long as I have your dear, good presence, with its warmth and sunshine."

The allusion to "him" caused Florence a strange thrill, and she was compelled to choke down a rising in her throat before she could speak. But she overcame her emotion, and said :

"I am glad you have come to that resolution, for as I told you before, he is not worthy of your grief or love. We can be companions—sisters—and console and love each other, and there is danger of our betraying each other. Men, I am beginning to think, are very selfish, and are capable of inflicting pain without

much compunction. They see a pretty face, are fascinated with it for the moment, flatter the owner till her poor, silly heart goes out to him, and then he leaves her for the next pretty face that comes along."

While she had been speaking, Fanny had turned her eyes upon her, and, as the sun reveled in the gold of her hair and danced in the violet depths of her glorious eyes and lit up the lovely face, with its cherry-like lips and gleaming teeth, the girl was enchanted. And after studying the lovely picture in silence for some moments after Florence had ceased speaking, she sighed and said :

" Florence, you are very beautiful. I never realized till this moment how beautiful you are. I wonder—"

But here she broke off and averted her eyes and looked out of the window.

" What were you going to say, dear ?" inquired Florence, curiously.

" I was going to say," resumed Fanny, with another sigh, " if it could be possible that any man would ever desert you. It isn't possible. I am sure that if I had had your beauty he would never have deserted me."

Florence blushed, in spite of her effort to treat the compliment practically.

" I do not know about that, dear," she rejoined, with a little sigh. " Perhaps he would. Perhaps you were as beautiful then. But—"

" No, no, Florence !" pleaded the girl. " Don't say that ! You must know that I was never beautiful—at least, nothing to compare with you. I may not have been as plain as I am now. My cheeks had a tinge of color then, and my eyes were less melancholy, perhaps, but I was always just a plain, simple girl, and he was the first that ever appeared to consider me pretty. He used to praise my eyes and my figure, but I now begin to con-

clude that he did not mean it. He was not sincere, maybe."

"Oh, he may have been, dear, and you may be doing yourself an injustice in considering that you were not beautiful. Indeed, you are far from plain now, although your cheeks are pale and your eyes a little heavy from hard work, but you will get over all that when we get out to my home in the country."

"I hope so!" sighed Fanny, who had long since become reconciled to taking the trip, and had even been heard to express a wish that Florence's money would come, so that they might start.

"I know it!" cried Florence enthusiastically. "You will be a different person in no time. I only wish they would send me the money to go home on. But it will not be long now. I am sure it won't."

"It is strange that your father doesn't come after you," ventured Fanny, diffidently.

"So he may, when he gets my letter," Florence hastened to say. "Of course, he knows nothing about my troubles—how can he till he gets my letter?—and thinks I am happy with my—husband. And, then, mamma being sick—poor mamma! I hope she is better before this—he could not very well leave unless she was better; and so he will be most likely to send me the money."

Fanny was silent a long time, and plied her needle diligently, but her face was very grave, and it was evident that her thoughts were busy. She also sighed occasionally, indicating that her thoughts were of a melancholy nature. Florence sat studying her friend's face, also engrossed in thought. At length Fanny said, without raising her eyes from her needle-work:

"And you never, never intend to go back to your husband, Florence?"

The question was so unexpected that it gave Florence a start.

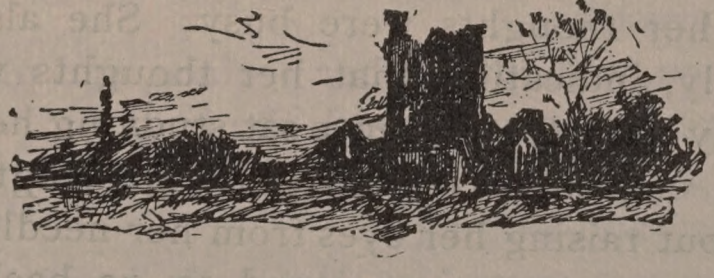
"Why, what a question!" she could not refrain from ejaculating. "Of course not. How came you to ask such a question, Fanny?"

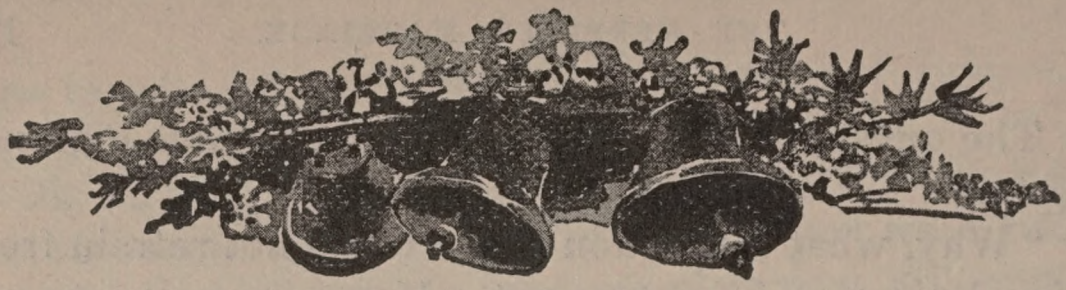
"Oh, I was just thinking," returned the other—"I was just thinking that if, when you got back home, he should come out there and your old love came back to you, and you felt toward him as you did when you were first together, whether you would not consent to live with him."

This speech had a strange effect upon Florence. The reference to her old love, of her feelings toward Sydney Parkinson when they were first together, gave her a thrill of indescribable delight such as she had experienced when, her own heart full of happiness and love, he had first whispered his devotion to her in words the like of which, for melody, she had never heard. Her cheeks glowed and she felt the warm blood tingling in her veins, as she faltered faintly:

"I cannot tell—maybe."

"Because," pursued Fanny, promptly, still not looking up, "it would make me very happy if you did—and were happy."





CHAPTER XX.

THE OUTCASTS.

Thus the time went on, and Florence had no word from home. She could not understand it. More than a week dragged by, and she began to grow anxious. Nor was she the only one that had grown anxious. The landlady began to exhibit unmistakable signs of anxiety. At first she indicated this through the medium of hints, vague at the outset, but waxing more unmistakable as time went on. At length one day toward the close of the second week, she flounced into Florence's room, and the instant she entered the door Florence saw by the stern visage and snapping eyes that the landlady was out of humor.

"Good morning, Mrs. McQuade," said the girl, timidly.

"Good morning, Mrs. Meredith," snapped the good woman, crustily.

And then, without further preface, and planting herself before the cringing girl, she began :

"Mrs. Meredith, when am I to get my money for your board and lodging ?"

"I hope very soon, Mrs. McQuade," replied Florence, turning very pale and drawing closer to Fanny, who

was sitting at the window, as usual. "I was just saying to Fanny this morning that it was strange my folks do not answer my letter. I am sure—"

"I think it very strange, too," interrupted the landlady, savagely. "Here you told me when you came that it wouldn't take more than three or four days to hear from home, and here it 's been nearly two weeks. It looks to me as if something was wrong!"

"I 'm afraid so, too," ventured Florence, not understanding the other's meaning. "Either papa did not get my letter or mamma—"

"Look here, madam," interposed Mrs. McQuade again, "this humbug has gone on long enough! Nancy McQuade is not a woman to be trifled with. The fact of the business is, your folks, if you ever had any, have cut you dead! Why don't you go back to your husband, if you have any, and make him pony up? Do you imagine I 'm going to be imposed upon by the likes of you? No, madam! So you kin just pack up yer traps as soon as you like, and git out! But mind, ye'll leave them fine rings and that watch of yours as security when ye go! If ye don't I 'll have ye arrested!"

With that the good woman flounced out of the room as meteorically as she came in.

Poor Florence was crushed. She had never been so humiliated in her life. She, who had always been used to every luxury and never known the value of money, to be dunned and insulted hy a vulgar boarding-house mistress! It was terrible. She could neither speak nor look up at Fanny, so deeply did she feel her humiliation. And then it came Fanny's turn to offer consolation. To her mind there was no humiliation in what she had just seen and heard. She had long since grown callous to the like. All she saw in it was a bit of rude-

ness and meanness on the part of the boarding-house woman, which, had it been applied to herself, she would have thought little of—it might, perhaps, have occasioned a good cry; but in the case of her friend it was altogether different. She knew Florence to be gentle and sensitive, and realized something of the pain it must have occasioned her. So she stooped down and took her friend in her arms in a sisterly fashion, and said, in a soothing voice:

"Never mind what that old creature says, dear. She knows no better. She does not know how to treat respectable people. Incapable of feeling herself, she gives no one else credit for it. But, thank goodness, we shall soon be out of her house, and we 'll forget her as we will all the other disagreeable people and things."

It was not until then that Florence found vent to her feelings, and this she found in a flood of tears. It was the first time that Fanny had ever seen her weep, and it affected her greatly. She had come to imagine that this sunny creature was incapable of sadness, and now to see her giving way to her sorrow in this manner—which was her own way—Fanny was saddened beyond measure.

"Don't cry, dear," she implored, struggling heroically to keep back her own tears and appear brave. "We shall soon come out all right. Your money will soon be here, and then we will leave the cross, heartless old thing forever."

"But," sobbed Florence, finding her speech for the first time, "she will put me out on the street, and what is worse, take my jewelry, and if I refuse to give her every article of it, she 'll have me arrested! Just think of it! I being arrested and put in jail! Oh, why does not papa come to my assistance?"

"So he will, dear," cooed her friend, bending over

and kissing Florence, "very soon now. I am sure he will."

"But it has been so long now since I wrote that my letter must have miscarried, and if he did not get it he will not come. And from what this dreadful woman says she wishes me to leave her house at once. Oh, what shall I do?"

Poor Fanny was at the end of her argument, and began to feel that the case was as hopeless as Florence herself felt it to be. She was silent for a time, meanwhile struggling with all her poor nature for two objects—one to keep from also breaking down and weeping, and the other to discover some way out of the dilemma. And then suddenly a happy thought came to her relief. Her face brightened, her eyes sparkled, and she almost clapped her hands as she exclaimed:

"Oh, Florence, I have it!"

Florence looked up through her tears with a half-startled, half-hopeful expression.

"What is it?" she asked, with a shade of diffidence.

"It 's a scheme," pursued Fanny, tentatively. "You, who have never known the hard ways of the world, will be startled—pained, maybe; but, after all, there is really no harm in it, and everything can be redeemed."

Florence turned pale. She imagined she saw behind this haze of mystery vague, grim shadows and horrid shapes of sin. She trembled in every fiber, and dared not ask the nature of Fanny's "scheme," so the latter went on to explain:

"You know the landlady said you must leave your jewelry with her, dear? Well, I should do nothing of the kind; although if you don't, and don't give her

the money, she is just brutal enough to carry out her threat of having you arrested—"

"You aren't going to advise me to run away without paying her?" interrupted Florence, with a scared look. "Because I won't do it. She shall take my jewelry first."

"Goosey!" laughed Fanny. "Who's going to advise you to run away? But the jewelry—"

"Well," interrupted Florence, eagerly, "what of the jewelry?"

"As I said, I shouldn't let her have it at all, because you may not get it all back."

"What then?" questioned the other, impatiently.

"Listen. As I have told you, I once had jewelry myself. I think I also told you that I was compelled to hypothecate it—"

"Eh?"

"Pawn it," laughed Fanny.

"I know you said your uncle got it," said Florence with a mystified expression.

"That is a name given by people who are compelled to pledge their things to the pawnbroker."

"Oh!"

"Now what I propose is, instead of giving your jewelry to this heartless landlady and leaving the house penniless, as you would have to do under such circumstances, to pawn the jewelry for as much money as we can get on it, pay the landlady what you owe her, and with the rest of the money go home. Your father can redeem it any time."

"The very thing!" cried Florence, jumping up and beginning to divest herself of her jewelry. But she suddenly checked herself and looked at Fanny. "But what about you, dear?" she said.

"Never mind about me," rejoined the other. "When

you get home, if you really wish it," she faltered, dropping her voice, "you can send me the money."

"You know I wish it, dear!" cried Florence, passionately, throwing her arms about her friend's neck. "But," she broke off with a sudden inspiration, "don't you think we can get enough money on all these to take us both? I would so like you to go when I do. I cannot bear the thought of leaving you here in this dreadful place."

"Maybe," acquiesced Fanny, a little doubtfully. "These Shylocks are hard people, though. They want the whole hog. However, as you are well dressed, they will do better by you than they would by me."

"Oh!" cried Florence, starting back, with a look of horror. "Must I go? I thought you would transact this terrible business for me."

"I should be glad to, but if I went there with my plain clothes, they would think at once that I had stolen the goods."

"Are they so suspicious as that?"

"Indeed, they have to be. You see, if the goods were stolen, they would be compelled to give them up to the owner should he call for them, and they would be out of the money advanced."

And so it was arranged, although Fanny agreed to go along and show her where to go, and half an hour later they left the house together.

It was a terrible ordeal for Florence to denude herself of all her jewelry, nearly every piece of which had been a present from some dear friend, and it was with a faltering step that she entered the pawnbroker's shop. There was a musty, disagreeable smell about the place, and no end of dirty, wretched-looking people. But Fanny steered her successfully past these and into a little stall, where she was able to transact

her business without having to submit to the volley of vulgar stares which were leveled at her pretty face when she entered the place.

The greasy, whiskered pawnbroker who approached her filled the girl with loathing, so much so that it was an effort for her to begin negotiations, but she finally screwed her courage up to this pitch, and the fellow examined the jewelry. After a good deal of haggling, he consented to loan her fifty dollars on about five hundred dollars' worth of jewelry, and Florence put the money into her pocket and left the place. She breathed again when she got outside, but her nervousness did not forsake her for hours afterward.

As soon as she reached the house she called the landlady into the parlor and asked the amount of her bill.

"Do ye want to pay Miss Forsythe's bill, too?" inquired the woman, suavely, for she didn't notice that Florence's jewelry was missing.

"Yes, ma'am," rejoined the girl; "everything to date."

"Then it 'll be thirty-two dollars up to Saturday, Mrs. Meredith," said the woman. "You know I can't take anything less than a week."

Florence paid her without a word, although Mrs. McQuade had neglected to deduct the four dollars and some cents she had given her on her arrival, and was about to hurry away to her room, when the landlady stopped her.

"I s'pose, now that ye've got your money, ye'll be leaving right away, Mrs. Meredith?" she said, coldly.

"Yes, very soon," replied Florence, moving toward the door.

"Of course ye *could* stay till Saturday," pursued the woman, with cold asperity.

"I suppose I could, as I have paid in advance till then," ventured Florence, timidly.

"Oh, yes," snapped the other, "and there's plenty just mean enough to stay out the very last day they've paid up for. I *hope* you're not one of that kind, Mrs. Meredith, for I always *supposed* you was a lady."

Florence waited to hear no more, but darted away to her room. Here she was met by Fanny, who asked her how she had come out with the landlady. Florence the incident briefly, when Fanny exclaimed:

"But, my dear, you shouldn't have paid the whole amount, for don't you remember you gave her more than a half a week's board when you came?"

"Yes," replied the girl, "but never mind. I would rather let her keep it than have another scene with her. The worst of it is, though, she insists that I shall leave at once instead of remaining for the time for which I have paid."

"You shall do nothing of the kind," cried Fanny, indignantly. "You shall stay as long as you have paid for, and for the other four dollars besides."

"Oh, no, I couldn't think of staying another day in her house, after what she said awhile ago. We shall go at once. I still have plenty of money for our fare and all our needs."

And so it was arranged. But when they were about ready to start Florence noticed that Fanny's shoes were very bad and insisted upon purchasing her a new pair. When this was done, the two girls packed up a few belongings and started with light hearts for the depot.

But when they reached the depot at Jersey City, Florence discovered that she had not sufficient money to purchase the tickets.

"But what shall we do?" she cried, in despair.

"You go on," replied Fanny, promptly, "and I 'll go back."

"No, no! I shall never consent to that!" cried the noble girl. "I shall not go a step without you."

"But you cannot stay here," persisted Fanny. "You must go on."

"Not a step!" repeated Florence, stubbornly.

"Then I 'll tell you what we might do. We might purchase tickets for as far as the money will reach and walk the rest of the way. It would be just jolly."

This plan was decided upon; but just then an old gentleman, who had evidently overheard the conversation, stepped up and inquired if they were short of money.

Florence reluctantly told him she was, when he informed her that cheaper tickets might be purchased by those who knew where to go, and he would be only too glad to purchase them for her if she would permit him.

"How much will they cost?" asked the girl innocently.

"To Jonesboro—six dollars apiece," he replied.

Florence gave him the money cheerfully, as that would still leave her two dollars with which to buy their meals on the way. The old gentleman took the money and went away. But although the girls waited for several hours—until after dark, in fact—he never returned.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CLUE.

After Sydney and Mr. Meredith had visited police headquarters and laid the case of the stolen picture before the authorities, and were strolling away together, Sydney began:

"There ought to be some hope of success now, my friend. Between the police and the newspapers Florence's whereabouts ought soon to be traced, and, if the police are worth anything, they ought not to be long in finding my picture. If Livingstone's friend told the truth, Florence may be greatly in need of our assistance."

"I do not know which fate would be the worse for my poor darling," moaned the old man, "alone in the great city or in the clutches of that rascal. I do not believe that either the police or ourselves will ever be able to find her. The story of her desertion of him is, in my opinion, a blind."

"Nevertheless, it will do no harm to look for her, as we have nothing else to do, and there may be a chance of finding her, if she should happen to be still in the city. I 'll tell you what we might do," he suggested, with a sudden impulse. "I might put in the rest of the day looking about among the studios with a view to running upon a clue to the whereabouts of my pic-

ture, and in the meantime, you might do what you can toward finding a clue to Florence's whereabouts."

"I was thinking about the latter," mused the old gentleman, "and I shall begin by going up there where we met the crazy woman and where you met Florence. Somehow, I imagine she must live somewhere in that neighborhood."

"I have thought so myself, but as she ran away from me as soon as she saw me," said Sydney, bitterly, "I did not deem it worth while for me to go in search of her. And now that I think of it, it will be better for you to go alone, as she will not run away from you."

Having thus agreed upon the programme for the day, and having further agreed to meet again at the studio about six o'clock, the two friends separated, each going his way.

As for Meredith, he went directly to the neighborhood of the school-building where he and Sydney had met Fanny a day or two before. He walked past the school-building, and for a block or two beyond, and then taking another street, came back. The old gentleman watched every face and scanned every window along the way, but to no avail. He then worked off in the other direction from the school-building, west of the avenue, taking each street in turn and canvassing it for the distance of three or four blocks, and then entering on another, and so on. And thus the day passed, and he returned weary and disheartened to the studio, without having made any discovery. Sydney was already there, and reported that his day's work had been equally fruitless.

Early the following morning they again parted, each upon his mission, but with little hope of success. At night, when they again met, they had only failure to report as on the previous day, and hope had fallen

another degree. And thus they continued, day after day, for more than a week, and still nothing had come of their labors. And what was still more discouraging, no report had come from the police department, evidencing that they had done nothing. Hope was at zero.

"What is the use?" moaned Sydney. "To-morrow will be Friday, and Monday the Exposition will open. Unless I should find my picture to-morrow, it will be too late to get it hung."

"Still, there would be the satisfaction of finding it and the thief, and of bringing the latter to justice," suggested his friend. "That would be something."

"Yes, that would be a good deal," admitted the artist, brightening, "and, contrary to the resolution I had made a moment ago, I shall persevere, thanks to your kindly encouragement."

Meredith made no reply, and maintained a reflective silence until appealed to by Sydney.

"And Florence?" interrogated he.

"I shall devote to-morrow to searching for her, and if I do not then find her I shall return home."

There was a solemnity in the words and manner which threw the nimbus of sacredness about the speaker which Sydney did not dare to profane with more questions.

The following morning they were off at an early hour upon their separate missions of discovery. Meredith chose the same neighborhood as before, not being able to divest his mind of the notion that Florence must be somewhere within a short radius of the school-building. He had scoured the neighborhood so often, and scanned the windows so frequently, that the people began to notice his actions and to wonder, and the policeman on the corner began to watch him with con-

cern and to consider seriously whether it would not be advisable to "run him in" as a suspicious character. But the poor old man had noticed none of this, and scarcely spoken to a soul in the neighborhood. He had made inquiries of no one, but simply searched, diligently, earnestly, with his whole heart in the work, with the one hope and purpose of catching a glimpse of his loved one.

On the morning in question, which was to be the last day of his search, he had patrolled one or two streets and was returning toward the school building, his centripetal point of action, when he was approached by a newsboy with an armful of papers.

"Papay?" cried the boy, in a soft, musical voice, utterly unlike the commonalty of his class. "You wanta buya th' papay, mista?"

The old man looked at the boy absently, and there was something in the great, dark, pathetic eyes which appealed to him. And yet, as he stopped and gazed at the earnest, upturned face, he did so in a half abstracted spirit. His mind was half divided between the boy before him and Florence, and somehow in the confusion of his dream he unconsciously associated one with the other in some mysterious way, and this caused his heart to go out to the boy, and, scarcely aware of what he was doing, he put his hand into his pocket, drew out a handful of silver and shoved it into the boy's hand. The expression of astonishment on the lad's face was a study. He appeared unable to realize the truth for some time, and stood staring first at the shining coins in his dirty hand and then at the philanthropist's face, with wide, wondering eyes. At length he murmured, almost inaudibly:

"Alla for me?"

It was not till then that the old man realized what he

had done, but he had no desire to retract his action, and smiling benevolently, replied :

" Yes, it is all for you, my boy. See that you do not spend it foolishly."

The admonition was lost on the boy, and his expression of surprise began to give place to one of doubt.

" You tinka good ?" he questioned.

And at the same time raised one of the coins to his mouth and tested it with his teeth.

Meredith was not only surprised but shocked at the action.

" Of course it is good," he said, indignantly. " Do you think I would give you bad money ?"

" Me nota know," replied the other, dubiously. " Richa th' folks not giva heap th' mun poor boy alla time. But me thinka gooda," he went on, assuming a satisfied air and putting the money into his pocket. " Me thinka gooda. You looka gooda th' man, same gooda th' lady, giva to me some time ring. Me no think gooda. It heap gooda. Me can sell twenty dol. Me no sell. Me keep for gooda th' lady. You lika see ring ?"

The old man expressed a wish to see the ring, simply because he thought that it would gratify the boy rather than from any interest he took in the matter. The boy took a small packet of tissue paper from his pocket and, after carefully unwrapping it, took therefrom a glistening jewel and handed it to Mr. Meredith.

As soon as he glanced at it, the old gentleman started convulsively.

" Where did you get this ring ?" he gasped.

" The gooda th' lady giva to me," replied the boy, alarmed at the other's manner. " Me no steala it ; she giva to me."

Meredith was much too excited for a moment to

speak, and stood gasping for breath, meanwhile studying the boy's face, which, by this time, had become a picture of fear.

"Where—where was this lady?" he finally made out to falter.

"Upa there, at window," replied the boy, pointing to a window a few doors away. "Me come long, sella th' papa, she looka out, me looka up, she open window, t'row down ring. Me no steala it, mista."

The old gentleman waited to hear no more. Hastening with all the speed he could command, he mounted the stoop and rang the bell. While waiting for the door to open he glanced about and observed a sign in the window which read :

BOARDING

BY THE DAY OR WEEK.

The door was soon opened and Meredith was shown into the parlor, where he was joined a little later by the landlady.

"What can I do for you, sir?" besought Mrs. McQuade, sweetly courtesying and smiling graciously.

"My name is Meredith," the old gentleman said excitedly, "and if I am not mistaken, my daughter is stopping here."

The lady opened her eyes very wide and puckered her mouth suggestively.

"There *was* a Mrs. Meredith stopping here," she murmured, studying her visitor's face thoughtfully, "but—"

"First name Florence?" interrupted he, anxiously.

"Yes, sir, I believe it was."

"Then she is my daughter, whom I have been looking high and low for these two weeks!" exclaimed the old gentleman, excitedly. "Where is she now, ma'am?"

"I do not know, sir," replied the lady, demurely. "She left here yesterday—her and another woman."

"Where did they go?"

"I can't tell ye," replied the lady, with asperity. "They went away without saying one word to me, I 'm sorry to say."

Meredith, agitated as he was, could not overlook the implication so thinly veiled by these words, and it caused him no end of grief.

"You don't mean to tell me," he gasped, "that my daughter went off without paying her board?"

"Oh, dear, I s'pose I shouldn't 'ave said anything about it," whimpered the good woman, nibbling the corner of her apron. "But, you see, I am a poor woman, an' it 's very hard for me to get along at best. I 'm sure the poor creature could have stayed here forever, and *I* could never have had the heart to ask her for a cent, she seemed to be in so much trouble—leaving her husband (as she told me) and all that."

"You are perfectly right in mentioning the matter, ma'am," interposed the old gentleman, warmly, "for I am amply able to pay all my daughter's bills, and I do not wish anybody to suffer on her account. How much did she owe you, ma'am?"

"Oh, there was only two weeks, sir," she rejoined, modestly; "but she also agreed to be security for the other woman's board, which makes it equal to four weeks—only thirty-two dollars in all, sir."

"Here is your money, ma'am, and welcome!" cried Meredith, feelingly, taking out a roll of bills and counting out the amount.

"Thankee, sir," mumbled Mrs. McQuade, gratefully, courtesying again. "As I was saying, I should never have asked her for a cent, an' she might 'ave stayed here for a year, for I 'd got to think just as much of the poor child as if she 'd been my own, an', as anybody in the house will tell ye, I done all in my power to make her comfortable and happy."

"It was very kind of you, ma'am, and I shall never forget your goodness. But I wish you could have detained her until I came."

"Goodness knows I tried hard enough. It was only yesterday, when she spoke of leaving, that I told her she 'd better stay a little longer, and mebbe you 'd come ; but you know young women are apt to be headstrong an' won't listen to them that 's older and wiser than themselves. But we was all young onct an' can't blame the poor creatures."

"Still, you say, she did not confide in you where she was going ?" questioned he, eagerly.

"No, sir ; she told me nothing. As soon as she got her money you sent her, she packed up what little she had, and her and the other woman left."

"The money that I sent her ?" exclaimed the old man, in astonishment. "I sent her no money, for the reason that I did not know where she was."

"Well, she got some from somewhere. I s'posed it was from you, as she wrote to you."

"I never received her letter. However, I suppose she wrote home, and her mother sent her the money. But about her husband—was he ever here while she stayed?"

"No, sir."

"And you do not know where he is ?"

"No, sir. But now that I come to think of it, I think I heard her tell the other young woman that she was going back to her husband."

"Are you sure of this?" cried the old man, in consternation.

"I am quite sure of it," affirmed the other, confidently.

"Did she tell the other woman in your presence?"

"Not exactly. I had been up to her room, and as I was going out Miss Forsythe asked her if she ever intended to go back to her husband, and your daughter said she thought she would, and as it was the same day that she left, I naturally s'posed she went back to him. By the way, I don't want to be inquisitive, but what made your daughter run away from her husband, anyway?"

"Because he is a miserable deceiver and scoundrel!" answered Mr. Meredith, hotly. "He palmed himself on us as another man, and as soon as she discovered her mistake she left him, as she had a right to do."

"You don't say!" ejaculated the woman, in great astonishment. "How was it possible for him to do that?"

"Simply through the accident that the two men were the exact image of each other."

The scandal-loving woman would have asked him another question, but Meredith saw that he had already been too garrulous, and cut the interview short by taking his leave.

When he again reached the street the Italian newsboy was nowhere in sight, doubtless fearing that he ran the chance of arrest if he remained; besides, he was probably satisfied with the money he had already received. Meredith bothered his head no more about him, and made his way back to the studio.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECRET OUT.

On this last day of the search for his picture Sydney went about his task as hopelessly as his old friend did his search for Florence. In the first place, he had visited all the studios in town and interviewed all the artists whom he knew, without finding any trace of his picture ; and in the second place, the police had been ostensibly at work on the case for more than a week, with the same discouraging result. Therefore, it did not seem likely that the picture would ever be found, and the artist was utterly disheartened.

However, he put in the day in a listless way, and toward nightfall sauntered down Fifth Avenue in the direction of his studio. When within a block of his destination he passed a neat and inviting *café*, and, downcast, his mind full of bitter thoughts—almost in despair—he decided to go in and have a glass of wine to buoy his flagging spirits. The place was arranged with cozy little stalls along one side, just large enough to accommodate four people, and where they could sit and take their wine and chat without being disturbed by the common crowd.

Finding one of these stalls unoccupied, Sydney slipped into it, seated himself and ordered refreshments. Sit-

ting alone thus, he was on the point of relapsing into his former bitter reflections, when he became aware that there was a party in the next stall. Sydney was not ordinarily given to prying into other people's affairs, but since he began the search for his picture he had unconsciously developed some of the traits of the detective, one of which was to cock his ear when he heard a confidential conversation which appeared to contain the elements of suspicion. And as the conversation that was carried on between the parties in the adjoining stall seemed eminently to fit into this category, the young artist found himself unconsciously listening. And then, by the time he came to realize that he was engaged in an uncivil, if not unwarrantable, action, he had discovered, so it seemed at least, that the conversation concerned himself.

So far as he could tell, there were three men in the party, and one of them spoke with the accent of a Frenchman, or, more properly, a Corsican, the accent being a mixture of French and Italian. The first thing that attracted Sydney's attention, although that particular part of the conversation did not particularly interest him at first, was something which the Corsican said.

"Well, old fella, you have ze wager won, fairly and wiz ze hard work," he was saying, "and I it pay freely. I have enjoyed ze romance of ze test verra much. It has convinced me of a fact which I nevaire could have believed had I not seen it, zat Nature does not always break ze matrix when she molds an object."

"In other words," laughed one of the others, "she does sometimes make two blades of grass alike."

"Zat eez it, and ozzaire blades, also," added the Corsican.

"You refer to roistering blades, no doubt," put in a third, laughing.

"For zure. By ze way, I will draw you my scheck for ze leetle sum."

"Little sum?" ejaculated one of the others. "By Jove! I should say that five thousand dollars was a pretty handsome sum, especially if I had either the winning or losing of it."

"A mere bagatelle," sneered the loser of the wager, carelessly. "I have won and lost twice so much at a single sitting at cards at Monte Carlo, many a time."

"You must be heavy players over there," observed the man who appeared to have no interest in the betting.

"Pretty fiar," returned the Corsican, with a light laugh. "But here eez your scheck, friend Livingstone. Your hand, my friend."

"With all my heart."

"Allow me to congratulate you, old fellow," interjected the non-interested party. "You are a rich man, and can roll with the biggest of them."

"Not so rich," answered the winner, in a weary tone, "after the division is made."

"You don't intend to adhere to your resolution with regard to the division, do you?" demanded the other, incredulously.

"Certainly. Why not?"

"You are foolish."

"Possibly. Most people who have consciences are more or less foolish, and I confess to having a conscience. The poor devil has evidently endured agony enough to deserve the whole sum."

"No doubt he has suffered; but if you restore the picture, which you have had almost as much to do with completing as he himself, and the girl already being his, he will be too happy to think of money."

"Ah, my friend, you are ignorant of the true status

of this affair, although you have been my constant companion, else you would see nothing for either jest or congratulation in it. Listen, my friends, for I am in earnest—terribly in earnest. You see before you, instead of the happy-go-lucky Bohemian you imagine, the most wretched man in the world. You recall Lord Byron's apostrophe to Kirke White, in which he compares him to an eagle with an arrow made from his own pinion rankling in his heart? Well, the figure fits me.

"When I accepted your wager in the *Café d'Englalaire*, one year ago, that I could not impersonate the gentleman we had previously met in the Fauburgh, I entered into the affair with the same reckless, devil-may-care spirit that I have always done in trivial matters, without for a moment considering the probable or possible consequences. But I had not gone very far before I made two remarkable discoveries. One was that the man whom I was impersonating was my own cousin."

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed the Corsican.

"The son of my father's twin-brother," pursued Livingstone (for the reader has guessed that it was he).

"This accounts for the remarkable resemblance," interposed the other friend.

"Yes, this accounts for the remarkable resemblance," assented Livingstone; "but that was not all it accounted for. There has been a feud or vendetta in our family for generations. My grandfather, it seems, married a cousin belonging to the opposite faction, and, strange to say, that while my grandfather and his wife always lived in perfect harmony, their first-born—my father and his twin brother—came into the world with the inherent hatred of each other that had existed between the two sections of the family for genera-

tions. One had inherited the poison from the mother, the other from the father. Well, as time wore on and their hatred increased with their growth, they one day met, fought, and my uncle killed my father. These facts had been repeated to me over and over again from my childhood, until they had been engraven upon my soul—burned into my heart as with a brand. Gentlemen, you who know me can testify that I was never a vicious or vindictive man in my life. It was the pride and boast of my life that I had never wronged a fellow-mortal. Like Abu Ben Adam, I loved my fellow-man. But, my friends, when I learned that this man was the son of my father's murderer, all the hell that the cursed spirit of revenge ever kindled in a man's heart burst into flame in mine. I could not help it—it was inherited in my blood. My first impulse was to follow the fellow up and mete out the horrible vengeance that his father had inflicted upon my father; but upon mature reflection I decided upon the series of insane pranks which I have played during the past year, which, I concluded, while subjecting him to more or less excruciating torture, would afford a certain amount of amusement to myself, and be at least less repugnant to my soul than the crime of murder.

"The other discovery was that the little beauty whose affections it was my intention to steal away from my hated rival, soon made a slave of me. I had not been in her society twenty-four hours before she had fastened herself upon my heart so firmly that death alone could ever sever her. Never did man adore—worship—a woman as I did her. I dreamed of her, lived for her—she had become a part of my very existence. I painted her divine image a thousand times. Indeed, I could paint nothing else. No matter what manner of model sat before my physical eyes, the face

of her whom I adored was the only one that appeared to my mental eyes, and it alone would appear upon the canvas. So you cannot wonder that I was able to reproduce her image so faithfully in this fellow's picture in a few hasty strokes. It was an inspiration. My brush was guided by my heart rather than my brain. It would have followed the angelic curves of her matchless neck, lent the glorious tint to her sweet cheeks and lips and touched the eyes with the tinge of heaven, if I had painted with my eyes closed. But I tire you with my recital. Let me come to a close. The moment this divine creature took possession of me, I was ready for anything—even deceit, which my soul had always loathed, to win her. Well, I won her—by deceit—that is, I won her consent, but not her heart. That refused to accept me, although she was in ignorance of my true personality. I married her—"

"'Married her?'" echoed his two friends.

"Yes, the marriage was genuine, although you thought it a farce. I had a double motive in the consummation of this part of the programme. In the first place, it would have been impossible to have carried out the plan of a mock marriage without casting a shadow upon the girl's pure name. I realized this at the last moment, and, even though I had had no more than a passing regard for her, it would not have been possible for me to stoop to the infamy of tarnishing an innocent woman's character. My other motive was the result of my love for her. It was my one wish that she should become my wife, and such was the ardor of my passion that I was willing to practice a little deceit to the end of consummating that object, hoping that when I had confessed my iniquity she would forgive me and ultimately learn to love me, as I did her. But I must take just this little bit of credit to myself, that

I offered her a release before we went to the altar. I wish to heaven she had accepted it, for now that we are married, and, although my affection for her has not abated one iota, she loathes and detests me, and we are both miserable."

A silence of several minutes' duration ensued, and then Livingstone resumed, in a husky voice:

"Yes, gentlemen, my folly has recoiled upon myself; like the asp that stings and dies, what I have inflicted I feel."

Another silence followed, and then the Corsican spoke:

"I am vaire sorry, my friend, zat our joke has terminated so melancholy. But ees zare not yet hope? Think you not zat eef you will go to ze young lady, confess all, and agree to any manner of separation she may desire, eet will make amends to some extent?"

"That is what I shall do, my friend, although even that will be slight compensation for the cruel wrong I have inflicted. Oh, why did I not return that morning and tell her all? It would have at least saved her the agony of discovering my villainy and deserting me in the manner she was obliged to do. I could then have been assured that she was restored to her home and friends. As it is, the terrible uncertainty that she may not have reached home, that she may have become the victim of some of the thousands of human hyenas that infest the city, drives me mad."

"Be comforted, my dear friend," pleaded the Corsican, soothingly. "Zare can be little doubt zat she has reached home. She ees a vaire sensible woman, and can take care of herself. Zen, eet may be, zat when when yon have confessed, and she has come to know ze gentle, generous heart you have, she will not only

forgeeve, but learn to love you. You are a man zat any woman might be proud to love."

"But how about your rival?" interposed the other friend. "Do you feel that you have avenged yourself sufficiently?"

"Too deeply—a thousand times too deeply," muttered Livingstone. "Why should I have wished to injure him? He has never wronged me. The feud between our parents was no fault of his or mine, and my only wish now is to make reparation for what I have done."

The conversation continued for some time longer, but Sydney had fallen into a sort of trance or deep soul-reverie, in which nothing but the clamor of his own inner consciousness appealed to him. What he had just overheard had not only thrown a flood of light upon the mystery in which he had been groping for the past fortnight, but it had opened his eyes to several things which he had overlooked before. One of these was himself. Up to that moment Sydney Parkinson had never dreamed that he was a selfish man. The world had always gone pretty well with him—he had always enjoyed a fair amount of comfort—and he had never bothered his head as to whether the rest of mankind were happy or wretched. It had never once occurred to him that any self-sacrifice, however slight, was necessary on his part; and if any such thought had ever found its way to his lethargic soul, he would probably have dismissed it with the comfortable subterfuge, "Oh, well, if people want to make martyrs of themselves, that is their privilege. I do not feel called upon to do so. I prefer the sunshine and perfume and melody of life. Let those whose lot has been thus unfortunately cast undergo the trials, the tragedy, the tears of existence." But the words which had acci-

dentally fallen upon his ears within the last few minutes had served as a mirror, in which he saw himself in all his littleness, his selfishness, his hideousness. He had coveted the hand of a pure and noble girl and had gained it, together with her unsullied maiden affection, and yet what had he done, he could not help asking himself, to deserve them? When he found that she had been misled into marrying another, what had he done to try to rescue her from the bonds which, in the nature of things, he knew must be hateful to her? He had used more effort to recover his picture than he had to find her, notwithstanding reason told him that it was no fault of hers that she was the wife of another. Again: If it had transpired that she had preferred the other man, and he had known that her happiness depended upon her union with that other man in preference to himself, would he have possessed the heroism to have given her up philosophically, and add luster to the glorious act by sharing his fortune with her and his rival? He knew that he would not, and in the light of the voluntary self-sacrifice he had just witnessed, he could not but realize his own meanness and unworthiness of the woman who had deserted his rival for his sake.

Then he began to consider seriously whether he could ever summon courage to face Florence again after what had happened. He realized that she would not know, and would receive him with open arms; but he would ever be haunted with the specter of his own unworthiness, and it was doubtful whether he could be happy or make her happy under the circumstances.

Again: Could he accept this man's generosity, or could he even accept the laurels that the picture—which had been brought to a successful completion such as he could never have accomplished—would bring

him? Would not the brow they encircled burn with shame?

Haunted with these bitter and humiliating reflections, the artist arose and stole out of the place with the feelings and air of a thief.

He slouched with the same cringing air down the avenue toward his studio, with his eyes on the ground, not daring to look any one in the face. But it was not until he was about to ascend the stairs leading to the studio that the full weight of his degradation came upon him. Then he realized that he would in all probability meet the poor, bereaved old man who had been his confiding friend all these days—who had believed and still believed in his manliness; and he felt that it would be harder to meet him than even Florence herself.

What should he do? For several minutes he stood irresolute, wavering between the half-formed resolution to go up and confess everything, and the less worthy resolve of running away and hiding himself from him forever. While he thus stood, half-heartedly debating with himself, he became aware of some one descending the stairs, and, on looking up, he beheld Mr. Meredith within a few feet of him. Sydney started as if he had been detected in the act of committing a crime, and in his weakness he would have fled had not the old gentleman rushed upon him at that instant, grasped his unwilling hand, and exclaimed excitedly:

"It's all right, my boy! Florence has left that scoundrel and gone home! We must go at once!"

Parkinson turned pale and grew extremely nervous, but could find no words for reply. The old man noticed his depression, and attributing it to the result of his failure to find his picture, proceeded to rally him good-naturedly.

"Come, my boy," he said, slapping him on the back and laughing, "you must cheer up. We have accomplished half our undertaking, and it will not be long before the rest of it will be accomplished, and we will have the satisfaction of having outwitted that rascal, with all his subtle cunning. Come upstairs and we 'll talk it over."

With that, Meredith turned and ascended the stairs, and Sydney followed mechanically. During his course up the stairs the artist summoned all his courage and fortified himself for the resolution he had first made before ascending, which was to make a clean breast of his shortcomings to his old friend, and by the time he had entered the studio he collected himself sufficiently to say in a calm voice :

"Sit down, sir. I have something to say to you."

The old gentleman complied mutely, but regarding the other with a wondering countenance.

"You say you have found that Florence has left this man," he began, "and gone home ?"

"Yes," rejoined Meredith, his enthusiasm reviving spasmodically. "I found where she had been stopping with a kind-hearted and generous—"

"So be it," cried Sydney, brusquely, interrupting him. "I have also made this discovery. I have also discovered where my picture is."

"You have ?" exuberantly. "Where ?"

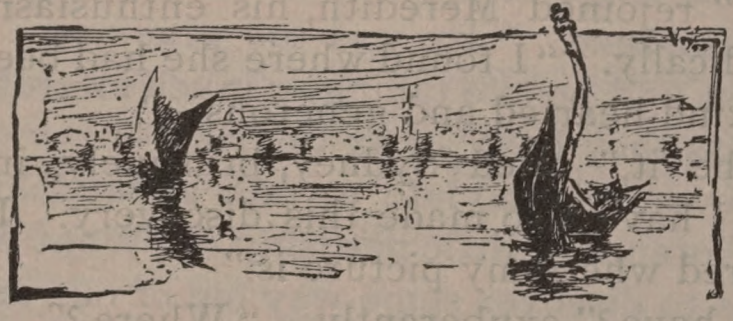
"Never mind," interposed the other almost rudely again. "What I desire to say is this: We have misjudged this double of mine all along. I have just discovered that, so far from being the villain for which we took him, he is one of the noblest, most self-sacrificing men the world has ever seen. He is in every way worthy of Florence—a thousand times more so

than I am, and it is my wish that she should become reconciled to him."

The old man was too much thunderstruck to speak for several minutes, meanwhile regarding his young friend with the utmost astonishment.

"Are you mad?" he finally made out to stammer. "What has come over you? I don't understand this, sir!"

"Neither did I till a few minutes ago," replied Sydney, calmly. "No, I am not mad," he went on in the same unruffled tone, "but I regard your daughter too tenderly to blight her life with myself, since I have been lucky enough to discover the sort of fellow I am. Go back home and tell Florence to become reconciled to Livingstone."



CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PILGRIMS.

When Florence and Fanny finally became convinced that the old "gentleman" who had volunteered to procure the cheap tickets for them was a swindler and not likely to return, they were in a sad dilemma. Florence had but a little over two dollars in money left, and Fanny was still worse off, she having but a few cents. Their combined capital would not carry them far, and they were in a quandary what to do.

"I was a little afraid of that man," observed Fanny, whose knowledge of the world was much greater than that of Florence. "He was too gracious. You don't very often find people taking so much interest in strangers unless they have an ax to grind."

"However, it's too late to talk about that now," returned Florence, a little pettishly. "What we want to do now is to discover some way out of our dilemma."

"What do you propose to do?" asked Fanny, despondently.

"That is what I would like to ask somebody else," answered Florence, smiling bitterly. "Here comes a policeman. I think I'll state our case to him."

"Don't do it!" remonstrated her friend, suddenly.

"Why not?"

"He won't believe you, and as likely as not he 'll want to take us to the police station and lock us up."

"Why should he do that? We have done nothing, except to get robbed of our money."

"He is not supposed to know that. Besides, the police hear so many stories of this kind which are not true that they come to suspect everybody."

Florence looked after the policeman, as he passed, with a distressed visage, and seemed exceedingly perplexed for some moments. She was far from being as despondent, however, as Fanny, and at length turned to her companion, and said :

"I 'll tell you what. We 'll buy tickets for as far as our money will carry us, and we will then be in the country, at least. I will feel more at home in the country than in the city, anyway."

She thereupon stepped up to the ticket office and told the agent to give her two one-dollar tickets.

The agent looked at her in surprise, and stammered :

"Where do you wish to go, miss ?"

"As far as the dollar will carry us," was the laconic reply.

The agent regarded her curiously, smiled and examined a rate-card. He then informed her what point of the road a dollar would take her and her companion to, and she promptly told him to give her two tickets to that point.

He selected the desired tickets, stamped them, and shoving them out to her, observed, with a smile :

"You're not very particular about where you go, eh, miss ?"

"Not the least," was the curt response, as she turned away from the window.

The next train was ready to go a few minutes later, and the two girls took their seats in one of the coaches.

It was already dark when the train started, and as the night advanced a sense of loneliness came over the wanderers. They strove heroically to keep up their courage and cheerfulness; but conversation soon flagged, and they gradually lapsed into silence. Folded in each other's arms, they dropped asleep at last, and did not awake till the conductor came by and shook them up to tell them that they had already passed the station for which their ticket called. He notified them that they must either get off at the next station or pay extra fare. Florence promised that she would, but without intending it, fell asleep again and rode by that station, for which she received a scolding from the good-natured conductor, and the mild threat that if she did not get off at the *next* station he would be under the painful necessity of putting her and her companion off.

It is needless to say that the girls remained awake this time, and at nearly the middle of the night the two forlorn creatures alighted at a dreary little wayside station. Desolate, frightened and almost in despair, the poor girls stood on the lonely platform watching the train as it burrowed its way into the darkness and disappeared. The little station was in darkness, and the station agent, having transacted the small amount of business required of him, had locked up and disappeared almost as soon as the train.

For a long time they stood thus, fearing to move and afraid to speak, lest the sound of their voices should attract untold danger. But at length Florence, who was the braver of the two, whispered:

"What shall we do?"

"I don't know," was the unsatisfactory reply.

"It won't do to stay here," whispered Florence, gaining confidence in herself as time wore on. "Let us go somewhere."

"Where?" whispered Fanny, falteringly.

"Anywhere. Let 's walk along the track."

"Oh, I 'm so afraid!" cried Fanny, clinging to her with trembling hands.

"What are you afraid of—in the country?" demanded Florence, with a dash of bravado.

"Tramps," murmured her friend.

Florence shuddered.

She had seen and heard something of this species of creature even in the quiet neighborhood where she came from, and she knew that they were often guilty of desperate things. But she was a plucky girl, and now that she had need of all her courage she was determined not to falter.

"Who 's afraid of tramps?" she sneered, with a light little laugh. "Come on."

With that she walked to the end of the platform and peered off into the darkness. A hundred yards away there was a green light which sent a pale, sickly gleam along the shining rails for a distance, and served only to intensify the darkness that closed around it. But it served another purpose at this moment. It gave Florence hope to descend from the platform and start along the tracks. Fanny followed timidly, still clinging to her sleeve. They plodded on in silence until they reached the light, when they noticed that there was a small shanty scarcely more than six feet square near it. There was also a dim light inside the shanty. This only added to Fanny's fear and dread, for she was sure the shanty was the lodging-place of tramps, but Florence had a different opinion.

"Let 's stop and see who lives here," proposed the venturesome girl.

"Oh, don't!" cried Fanny, in a terrified whisper. "I feel sure it is tramps."

"Nonsense!" scouted Florence, with a light laugh. "What would tramps—"

But she got no further, for at that moment a dark form emerged from the shanty. Fanny clutched frantically at Florence's arm, and gasped:

"Let 's run!"

But at that instant the figure, which appeared to have just noticed the girls, called out in a crusty voice:

"Hullo! Who 's thar?"

Fanny clutched her friend's arm more frantically than ever, and whispered, in a terrified tone:

"Come on, let us run!"

But Florence stood her ground and tried to discern through the dim light what the man was like. Meanwhile he had advanced toward them, and at length appeared to discover that they were women, for he said, in a milder tone:

"What 's up, young ladies? What are ye doin' out hiar at this time o' night? That ain't Bettie Filkins, I reckon?"

"No, sir," returned Florence, who had found her voice by this time. "We 're a couple of young ladies who got off the train at the station there."

"Hum!" growled the man. "Whar be ye goin'?"

"The fact is," returned Florence, gaining courage from his kindly tone, "we should have got off two stations back, but we fell asleep in the car and rode on here, where the conductior made us get off."

"Hum! Thet 's bad. But ye 'd best go back to the station yander an' wait till the next east-bound train comes along, which is due now in about fifteen minutes."

Florence was in a quandary. She saw that she had made a mistake in stating her case in the way she had, and was at a loss how to remedy it. But after a struggle she plucked up courage, took a step nearer the

switchman (which he in reality was), and briefly related their adventure from the moment of their false friend's disappearance with their money.

The switchman, who she now saw was an elderly man, seemed to ponder over the narrative for some moments, and at length asked in a diffident tone :

"Whut d' ye propose doin' now ?"

"There is but one thing we can do, sir," answered Florence, "and that is to make the rest of the way on foot."

"Whut !" ejaculated the man, in great astonishment, "foot it all the way to Jonesboro ?"

"That is all that is left for us," replied Florence courageously. "We have no money to pay fare."

"Why, do you know how fur it is tew Jonesboro, young lady ?"

"I am aware that it is a very long distance," rejoined the girl, with not a note of despondency in her voice. "It is about two hundred miles from New York, and we could not have come much more than fifty or sixty miles."

"It 's a hundred and thirty miles, if it 's a step !" declared the old chap, energetically—"a mighty long tramp for two young gals."

"Nevertheless, we have got to do it, for, as I told you, we have no money."

"Hum," mused the old man. "Ye don't think 'bout trampin' on to-night, be ye ?"

"We must ; we have no place to go."

The old man pondered a moment, meanwhile turning and glancing back toward his meager quarters.

"If ye could put up with it," he ventured at length, "ye mout make shift in the shanty thar till mornin'. I don't do no sleepin' myself durin' the night, an' ye 're welcome, I 'm sure."

"You are very kind, sir," answered Florence, gratefully, "but we would rather not incommode you."

"Not a word," said the switchman, heartily, turning back toward the shanty. "Ef ye kin put up with it, ye 're jest as welcome as water."

Florence started to follow him, but Fanny tugged at her sleeve and whispered :

"Don't do it, Florence. There is no telling what may happen if we go in there."

"Come on, and don't be foolish," admonished Florence, firmly, and her friend offered no further protest.

The old switchman preceded them into the shanty and proceeded to mend the grease lamp, the flame of which illumined his face, which the girls saw was a rough but kindly one.

"Now, young ladies," he said, when he had finished fixing the lamp, and turning to a rude cot there was, "ef ye kin make out with this hiar bunk, ye 're welcome, an' it 'll be better 'n bein' out in the dew, anyhow."

Florence thanked him, and protested that they should be very comfortable there, after which he went out and closed the door. Florence noticed that there was a hook for fastening the door on the inside, and placed it in the staple. She and her friend then threw themselves down upon the cot without undressing, and were soon folded in each other's embrace.

The shanty or switch-house was not a pleasant place. There was a pungent odor of grease and rancid oil cans, and as the hut stood near a swamp, the incessant and dreary croak of frogs could be heard on all sides, giving the poor wanderers a feeling of dread and desolation they had never experienced before. And then, just as they were on the point of dropping off into slumber,

the rumble and roar of an approaching train aroused them, and scarcely had this one passed before another passed from the opposite direction. And this continued at irregular intervals throughout the night.

However, along toward morning, the weary pilgrims fell into a deep slumber, from which they did not awake until the switchman rapped at the door, and they opened their eyes to find that it was just breaking day. Florence arose and opened the door, when the old man said :

" It's six o'clock, young ladies, an' I go off watch. Ef yo' don't mind trampin' over the hills yander a bit, I reckon the old woman kin offer ye a bite to eat."

Fanny arose quickly, and the two girls were soon accompanying the old man along the tracks in the direction of his abode. It was a strange experience for these two poor creatures, tramping over the rough ground in the dim twilight, now stumbling over stones or the rugged end of the ties, and now plunging into deep holes where the earth had been removed to fill in between the tracks. And everything was strange about them—the thousand woodland sounds as nature awoke from its slumbers, the strange, damp odors of dank weeds and grasses, and the still less pleasant odor from stagnant pools of water along the track.

As they came to the top of a small hill and looked away off across an expanse of russet and gray and yellowing green, and beyond a dark line of timber, the broad golden disk of the sun edged up, bright and glorious.

Little conversation had passed between the trio until now, but the sight of the sun aroused the spirits of all three, and, first beginning with Florence, the conversation soon became general and cheerful, even Fanny

venturing an occasional remark or asking a question.

At length they reached the switchman's abode, which was little more pretentious than the switch-house, but his homely but kind-hearted wife made the two girls welcome, after her husband had explained the situation, and soon had a plain but appetizing meal prepared for them, of which the girls partook with great relish.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PILGRIMAGE.

By the time the girls had finished their early breakfast, during which Florence had repeated their story to the switchman's motherly old wife, the latter had become completely charmed with the young ladies, especially Florence, although she had been a trifle suspicious of them at first. And when she came to tell her about their experience in sleeping in the switch-house, the old woman raised her hands in horror.

"Why, Rube!" she exclaimed. "What 'd ye want to let them poor critters sleep down thar for? Why didn't ye fetch 'em to the house here?"

"W'y, ye know, Mandy," responded the good-natured switchman, "it was nigh on train-time, and I couldn't leave the switch, an' I knowed the gals 'd 'a' never found thur way over hiar alone at that time o' night."

"That 's so," admitted his wife, "but it was awful for two young gals that 's been used to high livin' to sleep in sich a place."

"Don't worry on our account," laughed Florence. "I assure you we were very comfortable, and we can never forget the kindness of your husband in offering us his hospitality."

After some more conversation the old woman asked:

"How d' ye expect to git on from here?"

"There is only one way," answered Florence, cheerfully—"walk."

"Walk?" exclaimed the old woman, in horror. "W'y, child, you 'll never git thar in creation. Lemme see Rube afore he goes to bed, an' mebbe he kin fix it with some o' his fren's 'mong the railroad men."

So saying she left the room. The switchman, who had the night watch, was compelled to sleep during the day, and had retired to an adjoining room for that purpose. The door being left ajar, the girls could not choose but hear the conversation which ensued.

"Lemme see," mused the switchman. "The on'y man I know now thet hes a train is Ras Ruggles. He hes a freight, though es she 's on'y a local, ye never kin tell when to expect her along. Howsomever, I kinder think she mout come along some time to-day, an' I think she 's east now, so 's she 'll be goin' in the right direction. Jest let the gals stay hiar till 'bout noon, and then call me, an' I 'll go over an' see whut kin be done."

The woman returned to the large room, which served the general purpose of sitting-room, dining-room and about everything else except sleeping-room, and communicated the information to the girls.

"It is very kind of you," objected Florence, "but we have already imposed upon your hospitality enough, and I think we had better go."

"No, you won't do nothin' o' the kind," decided the old woman, firmly. "Ye jest stay here with me and rest till dinner time, and my man 'll try to arrange fer ye to ride, part of the way, anyhow."

They allowed themselves to be persuaded, and after breakfast was over with they strolled outside the

shanty for a walk. The shanty stood a short distance from the railroad track, but back of it, and stretching away for a long distance, were fields. Into these the two friends strayed, and, although it was too late in the autumn for many flowers, the glad sunshine, the smell of the grass and the fragrant breeze, laden with the spices of the distant wood and the broad fields over which it swept, and the many autumnal tints gleaming in the sunlight combined to gladden their hearts and make them forget their troubles, past and prospective.

"Isn't this better than the city, with its pent air and smoke and crowded streets, dear?" asked Florence, as they wandered on, arm-in-arm, like two simple children, as they really were. "Isn't it far ahead of the city?"

"Oh, indeed it is!" cried Fanny, enthusiastically. "It is perfectly delightful!"

"And it's doing you good, dear," pursued Florence, rapturously. "You are getting some color in your cheeks already."

"I feel ever so much better," said Fanny, smiling.

About noon they returned to the house, refreshed and invigorated, but very hungry. The old woman had a substantial meal ready for them, and they needed no urging to fall to and do justice to her simple but wholesome cookery.

When they had finished, the old woman awoke her husband, and he was soon ready to accompany the girls back to the station, where he hoped to be able to procure passage for them on the local freight, which was expected along some time after noon.

Before starting, the old woman handed Florence a good-sized parcel done up in an old newspaper.

"That is a little lunch for you to take along," she explained. "'Tain't much, but it 'll stay yer stummicks till ye kin git somethin' better."

"You are too good," protested the girl, trying to reject this new mark of hospitality. "We cannot accept anything more from you. You are robbing yourselves."

"Not a bit on it," laughed the switchman. "There 's on'y the old woman and me now, an' I reckon we kin do a little in our humble way for them that needs it."

"Well, you shall be well paid for all your hospitality," promised Florence, finally being prevailed upon to accept the package, "but your kindness we can never repay, although I promise that we shall never forget you."

"That is a comfort, anyway," murmured the old woman. "'Tain't everyone that 's grateful enough for that even."

And tears stood in the kindly old eyes as she shook the two girls by the hand and bade them good-by.

Luckily the freight train of which the switchman's friend, Erastus Ruggles, was conductor, came along about one o'clock, and although his train only went about half way to Jonesboro, he consented to allow the girls to ride in his "caboose" as far as he went. Indeed, being a young man, he appeared delighted to have their company. Before the train started, Florence went to the old switchman, and after shaking his hand warmly, said:

"There is one thing I came nearly forgetting, sir. What are your name and address? I want to write to you as soon as I get home."

"My name 's Reuben Stout," replied the old man, "an' ye kin write to Podunk Station. That's whur I git my mail, whenever I git any. An' I'd be powerful glad to hear from ye as soon 's ye get hum, an' I know the old woman would."

"You shall hear from me," said Florence, skipping toward the train. "Good-by."

"Good-by, miss, an' God bless ye!" cried the switchman, in a husky voice, and Florence imagined she saw signs of moisture in his honest old eyes as she peeped out of the caboose window for a last look at him as he stood on the platform.

It was a rude mode of travelling, this "caboose" attached to a freight train. It was no more than a large, oblong box with a hard seat running along each side, and a half dozen windows a foot square, which could not be opened, and scarcely seen through for the dirt. But it was so much better than walking, and then they had all the car to themselves, except when the conductor would come in for a few minutes at a time, when he generally made a point of asking the girls if they were comfortable. They always answered in the affirmative and thanked him politely, but Florence thought he might have taken their word for it and omitted the question a few times. However, he was very polite, and even Fanny could not deny that he was rather handsome, with his trim mustache and a pair of merry brown eyes. And then they could not forget that they were under obligations to him for their ride, and it would have been exceedingly rude for them to have been anything but gracious toward him.

The train was a very heavy one, and made rather poor time, even when moving. But there were a great many stops, and several times the train backed up for two or three miles for some reason which the girls could not understand. But when the conductor came in he explained that it was to let a "through passenger" pass.

Late in the afternoon they stopped for a very long time at a station, and the girls heard a very noisy gong clamoring along the platform, which they inferred was to call people to dinner or supper, and as they had

grown hungry by this time, Florence opened her parcel. She was both surprised and delighted to find a whole chicken, which the switchman's wife must have killed and roasted while they were out walking, and any number of ham sandwiches and other delicious edibles.

"That old lady is a perfect angel!" declared Fanny, ecstatically. "I never saw anybody like her."

"She isn't much like Mrs. McQuade, eh, dear?" laughed Florence.

"I should say not," returned the other, with a bitter smile.

"I told you the people in the country were different," boasted Florence. "Aren't you glad you are away from the city?"

"Indeed, I am."

Just then the conductor came in to invite them to go and get supper with him, and he opened his eyes when he saw the spread before them.

"You are very good," answered Florence, "but, as you see, we have plenty here."

"But it 's cold," he objected. "Better come and have something warm."

"No, thanks," said Florence. "We can get along splendidly with what we have here."

Nevertheless, he came back soon after with a cup of hot coffee for each of them, and after he had gone to all this trouble and was so persistent in his hospitality they could not refuse to accept the coffee, which they were glad afterward they had, for not only was it very good, but their new-found friend was greatly pleased to see them drink it.

It had grown quite dark by the time the train started again, and as the car was lighted only with a single lantern hung from the ceiling, which swung about as

the train jolted, making all sorts of weird shadows dance and perform the most fantastic contortions on the floor and walls, a sense of dreariness came over the girls. Florence strove to maintain her cheerfulness, and to keep her companion's spirits up by funny stories and quaint observations; but Fanny was very gloomy, and by degrees transmitted her gloom to Florence to some extent. And then Florence herself fell into a melancholy train of thought. She recalled the happy anticipation of her marriage, which was so quickly followed by disappointment and sorrow. She thought of her husband—not the man she had married, but the one she had loved—and wondered where he was. She could not reconcile the thought that they were one and the same, although her reason told her there was but one man, and that he had changed. And she thought of her mother, who was so ill when she left, and shuddered when a vague shadow passed over her mind; for it had never occurred to her before that her mother might be dead long before this. She also thought of her father, and although she had always loved him devotedly, and still loved him, she could not dispel a shade of reproachfulness that he had not answered her letter and sent her money with which to return home. How much longer she would have mused thus it is hard to divine, had she not been suddenly aroused from her reverie by Fanny's voice.

"I wonder where he will put us off?" she said, mournfully.

"Carter's Station, I think he said," replied Florence, absently. "Why, dear?"

"I wonder if it will be as dreary a place as the other one we had to get off at, and if it will be in the night?"

"I cannot tell, dear," returned Florence, soothingly. "He will most likely find some place for us to go,

though, for you saw how solicitous he was for our welfare."

She had scarcely ceased speaking when the conductor came in, and approaching the girls as usual, began :

"I 'm sorry I haven't a place for you, young ladies to lie down, though you can scatter along the seat if you want to." By which he meant that they might stretch themselves lengthwise along the seats, and then pursued : "I have a blanket over here, but it is only long enough for one, and the seat's not wide enough to sleep double."

Florence thanked him, but assured him politely that they did not care to lie down, after which he resumed :

"I hope to reach Carter's Station about three o'clock, or maybe a little after. If I make it before four, I think I can fix you out with the conductor of 'No. 9,' the west-bound passenger that passes there about that time. If I don't, we 'll have to make some other deal."

"You are very kind sir," answered Florence. "This is really more than we can expect from a stranger, but if you will tell me where a letter will reach you, you shall be paid for what you have done and propose to do for us as soon as I reach home."

The young man looked at her with a pained expression for a few seconds, and then his countenance cleared and gave place to a smile.

"I shall be awfully glad to hear from you," he said, with ill-concealed eagerness ; "but if you're going to talk about sending me money for the trifle I've done and propose to do, I 'll take it—yes, I will—I 'll take it as a—a—downright *insult !*"

He was silent for a moment, and made an excuse to walk to the door and look out, during which Florence noticed that he used his handkerchief in the vicinity of

his eyes. When he came back, a little later, the girls noticed that his voice was a trifle husky.

"I had a sister once," he began, "and—and—you'll forgive me, miss," he said, addressing Florence—"but she was—the very picture of you; and if it hadn't been for a rascal of a conductor that used to run a passenger on this road, she might still be alive."

"Is she dead?" faltered Florence, growing interested.

"Yes, miss," he replied, in a tremulous voice. "You see, this conductor married her and then took her to New York city and left her. When we finally heard from her she was sick and in want, and by the time we got to her she was dead! I'll meet that conductor some day, maybe, and then—" He turned his face another way and pretended to be looking at something outside the window. Presently he resumed: "So I always like to do any little thing for any young lady I see in a tight place. It seems kind of like it was being done for Maggie."

And he strode out of the car.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

When Parkinson finished speaking he turned abruptly and strode toward the studio door, leaving the old gentleman dumfounded and speechless.

That the young man's troubles had finally upset his reason there appeared to him little room for doubt. Meredith watched him to the door, and then, as he was about to pass out, saw him suddenly start back, as if he had met some dreadful monster. But as the young artist continued to back away from the door, the old gentleman saw the cause of his sudden retreat. To his utter amazement and horror, Bernard Livingstone and his two friends marched in at the door, each with a gracious smile on his countenance.

Livingstone followed up Parkinson, still smiling, and extended his hand. Parkinson scowled darkly and drew back. Livingstone still advanced.

"It is at an end, old fellow," he said at last. "Take my hand."

"No, I 'll be hanged if I will!" muttered Parkinson, sullenly.

"Why not? The ruse is at an end; I am a winner by five thousand dollars, and I am here to claim your friendship and divide the stake with you."

"You shall not have my friendship, nor will I accept your filthy gambling money," growled the artist. "You have robbed me of the only woman I ever loved, and my picture, and I denounce you as a scoundrel, sir!"

Livingstone colored and his hand trembled slightly, but he soon regained his composure, laughed lightly, and said:

"Well, under the circumstances I do not blame you, and therefore shall not resent your language. When you have heard an explanation of the affair, I am positive you are too much of a gentleman to longer entertain any feeling against me. Sit down, pray, and allow me to explain."

"I do not wish to hear any explanation," snarled Parkinson, "except to have you tell me what you have done with my picture and—Florence."

"The picture is finished and will hang on the line in the Exhibition as soon as your name is attached," answered Livingstone, good-naturedly. "As for Florence, you know as much of her whereabouts as I do. I supposed she was with you. If not, she is probably at home with her mother and fath—"

At that moment he allowed his eyes to wander about the room, when they encountered the features of the old gentleman. Stepping quickly toward him, Livingstone extended his hand.

"Mr. Meredith, how do you do?" he exclaimed. "You will not refuse to take my hand, I know."

But he was as much disappointed in this as he had been in expecting Parkinson to do so. The old man had stood an amazed spectator of the strange proceeding which had just passed, but when Livingstone approached him he shrank away from him instinctively.

"No, sir!" he said, firmly. "You have been the agent of too much misery for me to take your hand.

You stole my innocent child away, and, whether she is still with you or not, I do not know where she is. For aught I know, she may be dead!"

Livingstone turned deadly pale.

"Heaven!" he groaned. "It cannot be possible! But, my dear sir, you jest!"

"Jest! Hound!" screeched the old man, waxing furious. "Would I jest about my own daughter? I—"

"Certainly not! Certainly not!" interposed the other. "I did not realize what I was saying. But—great Heaven! this is serious! This is awful! I had no idea that anything of this kind would be the outcome of our foolish bet! My dear sir, believe me, I am in the profoundest sympathy with you, and will do all in my power to help you find your daughter, release her from the bonds that bind her to me, and restore her to the man whom she really loves. Come, let us be off at once."

There was too much genuine sincerity expressed in his face for even the old man, in the midst of his agitation, to overlook it. And then Livingstone's two friends gathered about and added their persuasive powers to that of the young man, and the bereaved father was soon restored to a state of rationality, at least.

"Now let us get our friend, and we will go somewhere where we can be quiet, and we will explain everything in connection with this foolish business, after which we shall devote ourselves to finding Florence."

But when he turned to where he had last seen Parkinson, that gentleman had disappeared.

"This is strange," he mused. "I wonder what has become of him."

"Maybe he has gone into one of the smaller rooms there," suggested one of Livingstone's friends.

At the suggestion, Livingstone looked into first one room and then the other, but Parkinson was in neither.

"I guess we shall hardly find him anywhere about here," prophesied the old gentleman. "From what I heard from him a while ago, my opinion is that he has given us the slip."

"Why should he do that?" inquired Livingstone, in surprise.

"I cannot tell. My opinion is that the fellow is demented. He was just raving when you came in about not being worthy of my daughter, while, as he avowed, you were, and he wanted me to go home and tell Florence to marry you instead of him."

"This is very sad," commented Livingstone. "If our bit of folly has resulted as seriously as that, I shall never forgive myself. It has caused trouble enough already. But come, let us get away from here."

With that he led the way out of the studio, and the others, including Meredith, followed. Ten minutes later they entered a palatial mansion several blocks higher up on Fifth Avenue, and when he had been ushered into the drawing-room Livingstone turned to Meredith and introduced him to the host.

"Mr. Meredith," he said, "allow me to present you to my friend and benefactor, Signor Lorenzo di Sorrento."

"Vaire glad to know you, saire," said the Corsican, grasping his hand cordially.

"And my friend, Mr. Carroll Mandeville," pursued Livingstone, turning to the fair gentleman whom Meredith had seen in the car in company with the Corsican.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance," declared Mandeville, also shaking his hand.

"And now, gentlemen, let us repair to ze dining-

room, vare dinnair avaits, and vare ze grand meestery will be explained to our vaire good friend."

During this speech, brief as it was, Meredith took occasion to cast his eyes about the apartment into which he had been brought, and what he saw almost bewildered him. He had seen many gorgeously furnished houses in his travels, but never in his life had he seen anything to compare with the lavish magnificence of this room. It seemed to him that the wealth of princes must have been expended in the costly furniture, the rare vases, the masterpieces of painting and sculpture, and the rich and priceless tapestry and hangings. It was only a transitory glimpse he had of it—just enough to thrill him with wonder and a vague longing to dip deeper into the beautiful mystery, like that of a child when it looks up at the starry heavens. But there was one thing that he could not overlook. There, in a magnificent frame, along with the works of Titian, Rembrandt, Corot, and other great masters, hung Sydney Parkinson's picture, and, smiling conspicuously from it, the glorious face of Florence. The sight filled the old man with a feeling of regret and depression. Whatever mystery might lurk behind all this business, he could not help but feel that a great wrong had been done the young artist in connection with this masterpiece of his. So deeply was he impressed that he could not refrain from stealing closer to the picture as the party arose to leave the room, when, to his further discomfiture, he beheld the name "Bernard Livingstone" in one corner of the picture. He could characterize this as nothing short of an outrage; but he held his peace for the time being, persuaded largely by his anxiety to hear the explanation of the great mystery which he and Sydney had been trying to solve for the past fortnight.

A few minutes later the party entered the magnificent dining-room, where was spread a most princely repast. It all seemed like a dream to the old man. It seemed as if he had suddenly gone to sleep in the midst of his trouble and anxiety, and all this splendor was the unnatural outgrowth of this same trouble, a peculiarity of the inconsistent laws of dreamland. He had been borne along, unconsciously, upon the tide of buoyant spirits about him, rather than by his own will.

The banquet was in keeping with the grandeur of the mansion, and served in the richest old china and gold and silver plate, but it had no delights for the poor old man, whose thoughts were with Florence.

"Zere eez but one t'ing wanting to make zis occasion perfect," observed the host, when all were seated about the board, "and zat eez to have ze beautiful young lady and ze young gentleman, ze prototype of my friend here, wiz us. Eet was ze intention zat he should be here at least, but eet seems he preferred not to join us, so we must get on ze best way we may wizout heem."

Strangely enough, after this brief reference to the artist and Florence, the subject of the practical joke which had been perpetrated on them was not again alluded to until nearly the close of the meal.

The conversation was general during the first part of the banquet, in which the host's wife and two beautiful daughters (which I neglected to mention) took an active part. Meredith, however, was silent except when addressed, being embarrassed and depressed by the mystery which appeared to surround everything about him, as well as the anxiety about the whereabouts of Florence which oppressed him.

At length they reached the dessert, and as the nuts began to crack about the table as a merry accompaniment to the popping of corks, the host observed:

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, I consider eet ze proper season for se grande explanation to begin, so zat our vaire good friend may know ze meaning of ze mystery in which he and his friend have been groping for some time past. Who s'all tell ze story?"

"I deputize my friend Carroll Mandeville here," interjected Livingstone, turning to the fair gentleman.

"I should be most happy to comply," responded the gentleman addressed, politely; "but in my opinion nobody can do it so satisfactorily as our friend Livingstone himself. There are points which no one else but himself can know, notwithstanding we have been pretty faithful witnesses, *n'est ci pas*, Monsieur Sorrento?"

"*Certainment*, *monsieur*," replied the Corsican.

"Very well; here goes, then," said Livingstone, with a sigh. "To begin with, I will say that it is a very sad story for me, as well as some others. A little over a year ago, while studying in Paris, I met my two friends, Sorrento and Mandeville. During their sojourn in the French capital we were together a great deal. Late one afternoon, while walking along the Faubourg St. Germain, we chanced to meet this gentleman, Sydney Parkinson, and Miss Meredith. None of us knew them, and they evidently did not notice us. The reason was plain why the young gentleman did not see us, for his eyes were buried in the crystal depths of the eyes of the beautiful woman at his side; but, as I say, we noticed him, and were all struck with the remarkable resemblance between him and myself. The resemblance was really phenomenal, but in the masquerade which followed I found it necessary to bring art into requisition to supply the trifling shortcomings of nature in making us the exact image of each other, which accounts for the fact that our most intimate friends were

deceived. But I anticipate. The conversation which grew out of our meeting this gentleman ultimately led to the assertion on my part that, by a few touches, I could render myself so exact an image of the other man as to enable me to deceive his best friends—not excepting the beautiful being at his side.

"This led to a spirited discussion, and ended in an offer on the part of my friend Sorrento here, who, true to his Corsican origin, would rather bet than eat any time, to wager a thousand pounds that I could do nothing of the kind. I did not accept the bet at once, and he grew excited, true to his Southern blood, and offered to increase it. The thing was absurd, for the reason that I hadn't the money, and he knew it. Nevertheless, he was bent upon making the bet for the sake of the curious and interesting experiment it would involve, and he offered to trust to my honor for the payment of the debt in the event of my losing, and, moreover, proffered to stand the expense which would necessarily attend such an experiment. The offer was so generous and the temptation to try to become the owner of five thousand dollars so great, I could not resist it, and the experiment was arranged for. [Livingstone, in his narration, refrained from alluding to the vendetta which had led him on.]

"Parkinson will tell you how I lived for a week on his credit at the Hotel Meurice, in Paris, (although it was afterward surreptitiously paid) while he was away in Germany. Here I learned all that was possible about the young man, his peculiarities, his antecedents, his prospects and intentions, and stored them up for future use. When I learned that he was about to return from Baden-Baden, I quietly slipped out of the way while he took my place at the hotel, and I then joined the family of his *fiancée* at Baden-Baden. It

was a desperate undertaking, and it required the subtlest maneuvering to avoid making a blunder which might betray me; but I succeeded beyond my own hopes. I succeeded not only in palming myself off on the family as the real Sydney Parkinson, but also upon the young lady as her affianced husband. In this I made a few blunders which caused her to marvel, but I always had the excuse of a treacherous memory and abstraction in my studies to offer, and matters went on very well. As Mr. Meredith knows, I accompanied him and his family to Switzerland, and from there back to Paris, although up to this minute I have no doubt he imagined that it was the other man."

"Parkinson has already informed me of that fact," interposed Meredith.

"Well," resumed Livingstone, after a pause, "after the family returned to America, I allowed the experiment to rest for nearly a year, being compelled to go on with my studies. After I had completed these, however, I summoned my friends, we sailed for the United States, and the experiment was renewed. I found that Parkinson was in New York, and that he was about to wed the beautiful girl, so I determined upon my final and greatest stroke—to marry the girl (that is, pretend to), and—"

"You were not really married, then?" interrupted Meredith.

Livingstone hesitated, colored violently, and finally said:

"I shall explain that directly."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MYSTERY CLEARED UP.

This evasion was far from satisfactory to the old gentleman, however, who said:

"I should prefer to know the truth at once, sir. It will relieve me of much anxiety."

"Very well, then, you shall know. The marriage was as valid as ever marriage was."

The old gentleman lapsed into silence again, and Livingstone resumed:

"I confess, sir, humbly confess, that I was guilty of deceit in the transaction, as your daughter, as well as yourself, believed me to be Parkinson. I regretted my action soon after, and determined to do all in my power to make amends, as I intend now to do. I should explain to you that I left a lot of papers open in my desk where she could not choose but see them, and I knew that she was not a woman if she did not avail herself of the opportunity of examining them, and I also knew that the moment she did examine them she would see that I was not Sydney Parkinson. I expected then that she would accost me on my return, when it was my intention to tell her the whole truth, proffer her her release, and then restore her to you and her affianced. But her unexpected flight upset that part of the scheme."

The father appeared to be satisfied with this, and the narrator resumed:

"I think that all concerned must say that I have acted honorably all the way through this strange business, and I certainly gave the young lady every opportunity to see through my ruse. And, to do her credit, I must say that, although her eyes were deceived, her heart was not, for, from the moment I entered the dining-room of the inn out there in the country until she left me in the city, her heart told her to suspect me. As an illustration of the test I gave her, as we passed over the bridge I used my power as a ventriloquist to warn her against marrying me, and succeeded so well that she imagined she saw the man who spoke to her—but I assure you it was all the result of imagination. She came very near weakening then, but her brain kept up such an even race with her heart that she managed to struggle through. I gave her another test in the chapel, when, as a ventriloquist, I spoke from the walls, saying: 'I forbid the banns!' but still her intelligence was allowed to conquer her feelings, and she allowed the ceremony to proceed.

"I will pass over the scene in the depot, where my friends came to her rescue and warned her not to go with me, and also of that on the train when my friends left the car when Mr. Meredith got to scrutinizing them too closely, only to disguise themselves and reënter it. My next best feat—if I may be allowed a little egotism—was when I slipped into the studio and out again, remaining long enough to do a little painting—"

"How, in the name of goodness, did you accomplish that?" interrupted the old man, anxiously.

"Simply enough. While Parkinson was away in the country I had a key made to fit the lock, so that I could come and go at will. The huge padlock which

he put on the door after his return frustrated my plans a little ; but the locksmith soon helped me out of that difficulty, and I succeeded in getting in a good many strokes during his absence."

"What was your object in working on Parkinson's picture ?"

"I had two motives for that," rejoined the artist, laughing. "In the first place, while I knew him to be one of the best artists in the country, I believed that I could collaborate with him with sufficient merit to deceive the public in my work."

"And you succeeded," interposed Meredith, "for he confessed that your work was not only equal to his but that you had imitated his peculiar method to perfection."

"Thanks," said Livingstone, bowing. "This is exceedingly gratifying—coming from such an artist. But I must tell you my second reason for working on his picture. I knew he would be upset a good deal by the strange happenings, no less than the loss of the young lady, and I feared that he would not, under the circumstances, be able to complete his picture against the opening of the Exposition, so there was a dash of charity in that part of my interference. This may seem strange in a man seeking revenge, but I am a queer dog."

Again the old gentleman reflected. At length he resumed :

"I noticed that the picture, which I saw in the drawing-room, bore your name. What are your intentions with regard to it ?"

"Bears my name !" echoed the artist in amazement. "You must be mistaken in that, sir. I have attached no signature to it, intending before the picture was hung—which is to be to-morrow—to have him sign it himself."

"Nevertheless, the name 'Bernard Livingstone' is on the picture now, unless I am blind," persisted the old gentleman.

"Impossible!" reiterated Livingstone. "How could it have come there unless I put it on? And I am quite sure that I have done nothing of the kind."

"Nevertheless," insisted Meredith, "I say it is on there."

Livingstone was dumfounded.

He did not like to contradict the other point blank, and yet he was quite positive that he was mistaken. At length he said, as with a sudden impulse:

"We shall soon settle that question. Let us all go up and see for ourselves."

"I know nozzing about ze case," interjected the Corsican, "but I should like to bet something on eet."

"Very well," assented Livingstone, laughing. "Which way do you wish to bet?"

"Eef I bet according to my reason," rejoined the host, "I should bet zat ze name was not zare, but as I would razzaire bet wiz you zan wiz our friend, I wager feefty dollars zat ze name ees on ze picture."

"Done!" cried the artist, laughing. "Here is my hand."

A few moments later the party filed into the drawing-room, and all closed about the picture at once. Livingstone, as the most eager, was the first to approach it, and as soon as his eyes fell upon the picture he staggered back with an exclamation of astonishment.

"By Jove!" he gasped. "Here is mystery for you that exceeds everything of our inventing."

"Eez eet, sare?" cried the Corsican, pressing forward to look at it. "*Diablo!*" he exclaimed, as he caught sight of the name. "Zis ees ze work of ze wizzard!"

"You may well say so," seconded Livingstone. "Otherwise, how could it have got there?"

"Do you mean to tell me, seriously," interjected Meredith, "that you know nothing of this?"

"No more than the dead," affirmed the artist, with a very grave countenance.

"You are sure it was not on there before you removed it from the studio?"

"Perfectly. Indeed, I am sure it was not on there this afternoon when we looked at the picture. Eh, Sorrento?" he questioned, appealing to the host.

"I am vaire sure of it," replied the Corsican. "Zat ees ze reason I say zat eef I should bet according to my reason, I should bet zat ze name was not zaire."

"And you, Mandeville—you remember that there was no name on it when we inspected it this afternoon, do you not?"

"I would take my oath there was no name on it then," answered the fair young man, earnestly.

"This is very strange," declared Livingstone. "I do not understand it. Can it be possible— But no. He would never have put that name to it."

"Who?" asked Sorrento.

"Parkinson. It occurred to me that he might have slipped in here, and attached that name for some purpose best known to himself. But when I come to think seriously of it, I know that it could not be."

"Eef zere was a moteef—" mused the Corsican.

"The motive which suggested itself to me," interrupted Livingstone, "that he might have put that name on—if such a thing were possible—thinking that I would overlook it until it was hung in the Academy, and then if he wished to make trouble about the matter, it would be a point in his favor to show that I had not only abstracted his picture but intended to steal it by

attaching my own signature. But I recognize the impossibility of his having been able to do such a thing, even if he were mean enough, which I do not believe."

"No, eet would not be possible for heem to get in here wizout ze notice of ze servants," remarked Sorrento, thoughtfully. "Besides, when could he have come? Certainment not since we saw heem at ze studio?"

"I do not pretend to say when he did it," put in Mandeville, who had refrained from offering a suggestion up to this time, "but that he did it there can be no shadow of a doubt. Livingstone says he did not, and I believe him. There is nobody else about the place, or in town, for that matter, who could sign that name as it is signed except you two; ergo, he must have done it."

"I will question ze servants," said Sorrento, with sudden energy, and off he put.

But at the end of twenty minutes he returned with a look of disappointment, and informed his guests that nobody had called during the day, and therefore Parkinson could not have been there.

Everybody had arrived at the conclusion that it was one of those insoluble mysteries which can only be left to chance, and had decided to speculate no further upon it, when Meredith was visited with a happy thought. His experience with the mysterious within the past two weeks had sharpened his wits in that direction, and he asked to be allowed to question the hall-boy. Curious to know what he proposed to elicit from that individual, the host called the hall-boy at once.

"You say that nobody called here this afternoon after your master and his two friends went out?" began the old gentleman, in a perfunctory manner.

"No, sir, nobody called," was the prompt reply.

"Now listen," pursued Meredith. "Do you remember what time the three gentlemen left the house?"

"About four," returned the servant.

"And neither of them returned until they all came back together at the time at which I was with them?"

The boy pondered.

"Why, yes," he rejoined suddenly, "Mr. Livingstone returned, saying he had forgotten something."

"I thought so!" exclaimed the old man, with a triumphant leer. "I thought so!"

"But, you infernal scamp," shouted Livingstone, angrily, "I did nothing of the kind! What do you mean by such an infamous lie?"

The boy turned pale and started for the door.

"Easy, my friend," interposed Meredith, laying his hand gently upon the young man's arm. "The boy has not lied—exactly. What he has stated he believes to be the truth. When he told his master that no one had called, he believed himself to be telling the truth; and when he stated that you had returned for something which you claimed to have forgotten, he was equally honest in his belief. The fact is, as I conceive it, you *did* return—"

"What?"

"That is, in the person of your double. I am surprised that, having impersonated him so long, you should not have surmised at once that he had turned the tables on you for once."

"By Jove!" gasped the artist.

"What time was it when Mr. Livingstone came back, boy?" questioned the old gentleman still further.

"A very few minutes before you all returned together," was the rejoinder.

"Ah!" ejaculated Meredith, with a sly wink. "I guess that solves the problem."

"In a measure," admitted Livingstone, still with an unsatisfied expression. "But what puzzles me is what his motive could be."

"The very motive you yourself suggested awhile ago," ventured Mandeville—"for the purpose of getting you into trouble, by having your name on the picture when it is hung."

"Then I shall obliterate it," declared the artist, taking a determined stride toward the canvas.

"Don't do it!" cried Mandeville, interposing himself between his friend and the picture. "If he has signed the picture, you have no right to obliterate the signature; and if he attempts to make a fuss about it after the picture is in the Academy, we have witnesses enough to prove, circumstantially at least, that he signed it with his own hand."

So the signature was allowed to remain.

The party then seated themselves to discuss their plans for the future.

"You intend placing the picture in the Academy, you say?" began Meredith.

"Yes, sir, to-morrow," responded Livingstone.

"And enter it in his name, of course?"

"Certainly."

"You also said something about dividing with Parkinson the money which you won on the bet?"

"Yes, I propose to give him half, if he can be found."

"But if he cannot be found?"

"Then I shall give it to your daughter."

"She does not need it," protested the father.

"That makes no difference. She shall have it just the same. But I guess there will be no trouble in

finding Parkinson. My opinion is that you will find him when you go home."

"I do not believe it, because he told me, the last thing, that he did not feel as though he could face Florence again, and wanted me to tell her to marry you."

The following day Mr. Meredith started for home.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOME AGAIN.

The freight train which bore Florence and her friend reached its destination—*i. e.*, Carter's Station—some time between three and four in the morning, and the girls alighted from the caboose, and stood on the platform for a good while, waiting anxiously for the conductor. He was busy about his train, and did not put in an appearance for a long time, and the poor girls began to fear he had forgotten his promise to secure them a passage for the remainder of the journey.

At length the headlight of the west-bound passenger was seen in the distance, and they abandoned hope. But just at that moment the conductor of the freight came dashing up, out of breath, and said:

"By George! I beg your pardon, young ladies. That was a slip. But I just made it in time."

And he had hardly ceased speaking when the train rolled into the station and came to a stop. The next instant the girls saw him in consultation with the passenger conductor, and saw the two men look in their direction. The girls watched the two men eagerly,

and were gratified at last to see the passenger conductor nod and smile, and then the freight conductor came darting toward them, and as soon as he was in speaking distance, he cried:

"It 's all right, young ladies. Get right in this car, and he 'll give you a lift as far as you want to go. Good-by. You won't forget to write? No money, though, remember."

"Good-by," cried Florence, giving her hand. "You shall hear from me."

Fanny also shook his hand cordially, and the two girls got aboard just as the train started.

The cushioned seat of the passenger coach was a decided improvement on the tiresome caboose, and the girls could not resist the lulling influence and soon dropped off to sleep. They slept so soundly that the remainder of the journey was passed in oblivion, and there is no telling how long they would have slept had not the conductor awakened them and informed them that they were to get off at the next station.

It was a little after daylight when the train stopped at Jonesboro, and when Florence stepped on to the platform and looked about at the familiar objects surrounding her, in the light of the multitude of strange events that the past two weeks had crowded into her mind, she could not realize that only a little over two weeks had elapsed since she stood on that platform—a bride.

"What now?" queried Fanny, anxiously. "Are we there?"

"Not quite," returned Florence, joyfully. "But we soon will be."

"Is it far from here?" asked the other, in a faint voice.

This caused Florence to look at her, which she had

neglected to do for some time before, and she saw that the girl was very pale and looked faint.

"Why, my dear," she cried, "you are ill. Come into the station here and sit down. I shall go to a livery stable here, and hire a horse and buggy to take us home."

Fanny made no response until Florence had led her into the little waiting-room, and when she had been comfortably seated, she looked up anxiously and said:

"But, Florence, you have no money, you remember. How are you going to hire a horse and buggy?"

Florence laughed heartily.

"Why, my dear," she replied, "we are in the country now, and everybody knows me here. Wait just a little while, dear. I shall soon be back."

And away she tripped.

Half an hour later she drove up to the station with a spirited horse attached to a light side-bar buggy.

"Hullo, Miss Meredith!" came a familiar voice.

And, looking up, she beheld the broad, homely features of one of her neighboring farmer's sons.

"Hello, Jim Higgins!" she saluted in return. "Have you seen any of our folks lately?"

"Yaas, I was to the house this mornin'," was the drawling reply.

"Is everybody well?" she questioned, anxiously.

"Yaas, they seemed to be, 'cept yer mammy. She 's been ailin' fer some time; but there 's nothin' dangerous, I reckon. She was powerful anxious 'bout yew an' yer daddy, I hearn tell, though."

"My father?" cried Florence, perplexed. "What about him?"

"W'y, you know he went away the next day arter yew did, and they haven't never hearn from him but onct sence, an' they don't know what to think on 't."

"Where did he go? Where was he when they heard from him?" she questioned eagerly.

"Down to New York, I hearn tell."

Florence waited to ask no more questions, but said:

"Hold my horse a moment, Jim," and she jumped out of the buggy.

The young farmer stepped down and took the horse by the head, and Florence hurried into the station, got Fanny and led her out to the buggy, and they were soon on their way to Florence's home.

The familiar scenes along the road were not in the least changed, which seemed odd to her, for she could not divest herself of the idea that it had been months instead of a couple of weeks since she had passed over the road before. The autumnal foliage had turned a shade or two more russet or brown, and the trees had shed a few more of their crimson and yellow leaves, but that was all. But how every incident attending that last ride over this road crowded upon her now! Especially vivid did the incident of the two horsemen following her and her friends appear before her, and filled her with a transitory feeling of dread, which impelled her to glance apprehensively about, as if she momentarily expected to see them ride out and start in pursuit of her again. Fanny noticed her nervousness and asked the cause.

"Nothing," she replied, regaining her presence of mind at the sound of her friend's voice, and bursting forth in a wild peal of laughter that awoke the echoes.

But even the sound of her own voice, duplicated and hurled back from the resounding depths of the forest, gave her a shiver, and she gave the horse a cut with the whip, which caused him to break into a mad gallop, and the gait was kept up until they reached the wayside inn.

"We 'll stop here and get breakfast," remarked Florence, as she drove up to the gate. "It did not occur to me till just now that I was nearly starved. You must be famished yourself, dear."

"I *am* a little hungry," admitted her friend.

"But how do you feel, dear?" questioned Florence, looking at her with concern. "You were not feeling well when we left the station."

"Oh, I am much better now, thank you," replied Fanny, with a faint smile. "The ride has done me good."

"Oh, I am so glad!" cried Florence, gleefully. "Indeed, the ride *has* done you good. You have a good deal of color in your cheeks."

At this moment old John Burton, the fat landlord, reached the gate, and, after shading his eyes to see who the travellers were, and discovering, started back, opened his eyes very wide, and finally gasped:

"Wal, bless my soul and body, if it ain't the little lady—Florence! Where, in the name o' goodness, dew yew come frum, child?"

"New York," replied Florence, impatiently.

"But whar's the husband?" he asked. "Nothin' ain't the matter, I hope?"

"No, nothing the matter," she answered, still more impatiently. "But *do* open the gate, Mr. Burton, and let us have some breakfast, for we are famished."

"W'y, sartin!" he cried, with sudden energy, throwing open the gate and taking the horse by the bits. "Pardon me fer keepin' ye, but I was so upsot at seein' ye back so soon, an' that alone, thet I nigh fergot whar I was or thet I was a-livin'."

By this time he had led the horse inside the yard and lifted the two girls out of the buggy.

The tall, lank hostler arrived by this time, and the

horse given into his hands, after which the fat host followed the girls into the house, waddling and chattering away as he went.

"I hearn t'other day thet yer daddy'd went off somers, Florry," he gossiped, "an' thet the folks hedn't hearn frum him, an' thet they was a good deal worried 'bout him. Hev yew hearn anything 'bout it?"

"I only know that he came to New York," replied Florence, wearily, "and that, as he was only absent two weeks, he did not think it worth while to write. That is all there is to it."

And she hoped in her heart that she had guessed the truth, although the ventured assertion was far from quieting her own apprehensions.

A strange thrill ran through her as she stepped into the dining-room some time later, and she glanced about instinctively, vaguely expecting to see the two strangers and, perhaps—*him*. But she saw only an empty room, and the lonesomeness of the place inspired a sense of depression which precluded conversation.

Fanny, who began to feel that her days of slavery were at an end, was much more cheerful, and strove hard to rally her friend, but with poor success. She knew nothing of Florence's unhappy experiences of the past two weeks beyond the fact that she had been married and had found it impossible to live with her husband, and therefore could have no conception of the depth of her misery.

When they were on the road again, however, either from genuine exuberance or sheer desperation, she appeared suddenly to recover her spirits, and then went to the other extreme and became almost hilarious in her joyfulness. Even while crossing Brothers Bridge, and she recalled the apparition which had

frightened her so, and which had counseled her not to go to the chapel, she treated the thought with good-natured derision, and related the story to Fanny, which filled the girl with wonder and awe.

"What do you suppose it was?" questioned Fanny, in great concern.

"I don't know—some practical joker, maybe," said Florence, with a light laugh.

"But it prophesied correctly," ventured her friend. "How do you account for that?"

"I don't pretend to account for it," replied Florence, with a supercilious shrug and a derisive peal of laughter, notwithstanding the question had caused a painful tug at her heartstrings.

As they arose to the top of the hill and the road wound about a crag, she pointed at a little chapel which nestled away among the trees at some distance from the road, and said:

"There is where I was married," and followed the remark with a ripple of laughter, although a better student of human nature could have seen that it cost her an effort, and that the playful shrug of her shoulders was a ruse to disguise the shudder that asserted itself at the sight of the chapel where she had been an unwilling bride.

Fanny was silent and grave. She evidently viewed the matter in a more serious light.

"I should think it would make you feel sad to think of all this," she ventured at last, in a tremulous voice. "I know it would me."

"Why should I be sad?" querried Florence, gayly.

"Why, the thought that you expected such happiness and were disappointed."

"On the other hand," argued Florence, "the thought that I discovered my mistake in time to save myself a

life of misery, should make me exceedingly happy. Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps—if you are sure that you could not be happy with him. But that is what I cannot understand. If you loved him once, I don't see why you shouldn't always love him."

"That is because you are not philosophical, my dear," returned Florence, growing suddenly grave. "Suppose you saw a jewel in a shop window and it dazzled and attracted you. You admired it the more you looked at it, and finally made up your mind to purchase it. Then, when you got it home, you would discover that it was only a cheap paste thing. Would you still admire and value it? Or would you throw it away?"

"I should probably throw it away," replied Fanny, quietly, "but it is different with husbands."

"Yes, I know it is, somewhat. It is not so easy to throw them away after you have once got them. It is, therefore, better to throw them away beforehand, if possible."

"But you waited till you were married," ventured Fanny.

"Surely, but that was because I did not gain courage enough before."

Fanny reflected some time, and then said:

"Do you know what I think, Florence?"

"It would be hard to surmise," laughed her friend.

"I think that your husband will come back and you will learn to love him and be happy with him yet."

"What a foolish dear you are!" laughed Florence. "What makes you think that!"

"I don't know. It is a sort of premonition."

"Premonitions go for nothing in this practical world,

I am inclined to think. Papa, who is a physician, says they are the result of a condition of the stomach."

"But they are sometimes fulfilled."

"Undoubtedly. That is, by some inexplicable coincidence, things happen as we have thought they might. But in many cases prophesy is the result of circumstances which, we cannot help seeing, ought, in the nature of things, to lead up to certain results. If, for instance, a friend's health is such as to lead us to fear that he will not survive a certain period, and our minds are somewhat clouded by the contemplation, and perhaps a bad digestion adds to our despondency, we are apt to have a premonition, as you call it, and the chances are largely in favor of its fulfillment."

"But I hope it will not turn out so in this case," interjected Fanny, timidly, "for it would make me very happy."

"Bless your dear, kind heart!" cried Florence, rapturously, putting her arm about her. "And if it will add to your happiness, I wish so, too."

Early in the afternoon they reached the farm, where they were received with open arms, Fanny no less than Florence, when the latter told her mother that Fanny was her dear friend.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

COMPARING NOTES.

Florence's mother was not only glad but astonished to see her back again, and nothing would do but Florence must sit down by her bedside and relate her strange experience from beginning to end, which she did, not in the spirit of one who has suffered and is rehearsing the tale of her own woes, but rather like one who is telling the experiences of another.

Her mother listened attentively and without once raising her voice to interrupt or interpose a question; but at the conclusion she had the appearance of one who has been listening to a bit of the wildest fiction rather than to sober facts.

"This is most wonderful, Florry!" she exclaimed at last. "If it had all been told me by anybody else, I could not have believed it. But, dear, don't you think that you might have been mistaken? Do you not think, after all, that you might have learned to love Sydney? You know how passionately you were attached to him while we were in Europe, especially when we were in Switzerland. And I know that your father and I imagined he had grown more gentle and a great deal brighter after he rejoined us at Baden-Baden. I remember your father saying that certain

matters upon which he had acknowledged total ignorance when we first met him he appeared to be perfectly familiar with afterward."

"Yes, I noticed that, mamma," answered Florence, "and that was one of the reasons for my losing interest in him. He seemed to forget the most important things about which he had talked. Really, I have almost come to believe sometimes that there were two of them. But, to answer your first question, mamma, I could not be mistaken in my feelings. One cannot help one's likes and dislikes, you know, and I know you would not expect me to live with a man whom I could not help but detest and loathe with every atom of my being."

"Certainly not, my dear; but it is a dreadful blight on your young life to be disappointed in that way."

"Oh, do not worry, mamma," answered Florence, lightly. "I don't mind it half as much as I would have supposed I should, and I have no doubt I shall soon forget all about it."

"No, indeed, you will not, my dear. You may not think much of it now, but in after years, even if you should love another and marry, the recollection of this romantic first love will come to you amidst your troubles and joys, and your heart will ache; for you cannot deny that this was a very sweet, romantic love affair. You seemed so well adapted for each other, and were so happy in each other's society, that it made me very happy to see you. Ah me! It is a dreadful calamity."

And her mother covered her face and wept.

"Don't take on so, mamma, dear," Florence implored. "It may all come out well in the end; and if it does not, I know I shall not be so *very* unhappy."

Later, they came to talk of Florence's father, and to speculate as to what had become of him.

"He has only written once," observed the mother,

"and he did not mention a word about there being any trouble; and yet he must have known something about it, or he would not have gone on without saying anything to anybody."

"He might have been called to the city on some other business, mightn't he?" suggested Florence.

"I can think of nothing which could have been of sufficient importance and secrecy to call him off like that."

Later in the afternoon Mr. Meredith put all speculation at an end by arriving at home.

He was overjoyed to see his daughter safe at home, after all his worry in attempting to find her.

"You little minx!" he cried, hysterically, after the first ecstasy of his joy had subsided somewhat, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I was on your track, but before I could run you to ground you would skip off somewhere else."

"Was that what took you to the city, papa?" asked his daughter.

"Certainly, my dear. What else could have taken me?"

"Didn't I tell you, Florry?" interposed the mother.

"But how did you learn about the separation?" inquired Florence, anxiously. "Did he tell you?"

"Who?"

"Sydney."

"My dear, he knew no more about it than I did. As a matter of fact, neither of us knew anything about it until last night."

"*He* didn't know anything about it?" ejaculated Florence, with a bewildered countenance.

"Certainly not. How could he?"

"Didn't he go back to the house after I left?" questioned the girl, still waxing in bewilderment.

To her and her mother's astonishment, he burst out laughing at this question.

"My dear," Mr. Meredith said at length, "let me set you right before you ask any more questions. First of all let me tell you that there are two men instead of one that we have had to deal with. The name of one is Sydney Parkinson; that is the one you were betrothed to. The other is Bernard Livingstone; that is the one you married."

"Did I not tell you, mamma?" uttered Florence, triumphantly.

"Yes," pursued her father. "I told myself the moment I had discovered the trick that your heart had told you the truth, although your eyes had deceived you."

"When did you first discover it?" asked Florence.

"Two minutes after you had departed on the train. The incoming train from the East brought Parkinson. Then it was that I discovered that we had been deceived by another man who resembled Parkinson, and he and I took the next train back to the city."

The old gentleman then proceeded to relate in detail all the circumstances attending the search for Florence and the picture. When he came to that part where he went to her boarding-house, he said;

"That is a remarkably kind old lady with whom you happened to stop, Florry, and I was glad to be able to pay her well for the trouble and expense she had been to on your account."

Florence gasped.

"Trouble—and—expense—on my account?" she faltered, at last. "Why, she never went to any trouble or expense for which she was not well paid."

"But your board, my dear," interposed her father. "Of course you didn't pay that? How could you?"

"Of course I did—more than paid her," ejaculated she. "You do not mean to say that she told you I owed her anything, papa?"

"She certainly did, and I paid her thirty-two dollars."

Florence arose, and stepping to the window, called Fanny, who was sitting on the porch.

"Fanny," she said, as soon as her friend had entered the room, "what do you think that Mrs. McQuade has done? She told papa that I hadn't paid my board, and had him pay it again, the mean old thing!"

"I am not surprised at that," returned Fanny, smiling faintly. "She is capable of almost anything."

As she spoke, Fanny eyed the old gentleman closely, flushed, and then excusing herself, left the room. She appeared not to recognize him at the time she was introduced to him. As soon as she had left the room, Mr. Meredith said:

"Is that the woman who was with you at the boarding-house, my dear?"

"Yes, papa, and a dear good girl she is," returned Florence.

"I have seen her before," resumed her father.

"Seen Fanny before?" exclaimed Florence, in surprise. "Where, papa?"

Her father related the circumstance of meeting what he and Sydney Parkinson supposed to be a crazy woman, and concluded by saying:

"I am positive it is the same woman."

"I have no doubt of it," returned his daughter. "She told me about meeting him—at least a man who had wronged her. But the man's name was Livingstone, so it must have been the same man to whom I was married."

"It was a fortunate escape you made, then, dear,"

interjected the mother. "The fellow must be a heartless scamp."

"I am sorry to learn this," mused the father, dejectedly, "for from what I have learned and seen of Bernard Livingstone within the last twenty-four hours, I had come to the conclusion that he was the better man of the two. Indeed, Parkinson declared as much himself, and requested me to tell you to reconcile yourself to Livingstone, as he did not feel that he could ever face you again. And, in spite of this circumstance, admitting it to be true, I would rather see you married to Livingstone to-day than Parkinson."

"Why, papa?" asked Florence, curiously.

"He is the manlier of the two," answered her father, firmly. "During all the time we were searching for you—at least, that I was searching for you—he did not appear to take the least interest in the matter, and did not seem to care whether you were found or not. I do not think I ever met a more unmanly man in my life, and I should regret, now that I know what he is, to have you marry him."

"And yet you could not expect me to live with the man to whom I am married, papa, after marrying me under false pretense?"

"He confesses to having committed a great wrong in that affair, but is very penitent and willing to do anything to make amends, even to offering you your freedom. It was his intention to undeceive you and ask forgiveness, and no doubt would have done so had you not run away."

"Why did he not do it before he left?" cried the girl, spitefully.

"He left his desk full of his papers open for you to find out that he was not Parkinson," interrupted her father, "and it was his intention to confess everything

when he returned. But you did not give him a chance, which, by the way, was just as well, probably."

Florence colored a little as she said, a little later:

"He does seem to be a very honorable man."

"Honorable man?" ejaculated the father. "A more honorable gentleman never lived! Why, do you know what he intended to do? You must know that he won five thousand dollars on the experiment of passing himself off for Parkinson. Well, he proposes to give half of it to you and Sydney—in case the latter can be found—to go to housekeeping on."

"In case he can be found?" echoed Florence.

"Yes, he disappeared as soon as he discovered the ruse, and we have not been able to trace him since. But, speaking of Livingstone, do you remember we liked him—that is, the man (we thought it the same then) who went to Switzerland with us, better than the one we first met in Paris?"

"That is just what mamma was saying before you returned," said Florence, blushing. "I know I thought he was ever so much nicer."

"Why, he knew as much as two of Parkinson," declared Meredith. "I shall not insist upon your living with him, my dear, but I shall look into this other affair of his. Of course, if I find that he has really wronged this girl, he shall never set a foot in my house; but, from what I have seen of him, I do not hesitate to say that I do not believe a word of it. There is some mistake somewhere."

"Might not the other man have deceived her?" ventured the mother.

"You are right, my dear," returned Meredith, catching at the idea. "Indeed, I think it the most likely."

"But the name, papa?" interposed Florence.

"Name, fiddlesticks!" scouted her father. "Isn't it

easy enough for people of his character to take one name as well as another? For aught we know, Sydney Parkinson is an assumed name."

When the two girls went to their rooms that night, Fanny stopped in Florence's room to talk a while before retiring.

"How do you feel, dear?" asked Florence, taking her in her arms and kissing her.

"Oh, so well!" murmured Fanny. "You are all so good to me, and everything is so fresh and bright here, that I know I shall be very happy—at least, I hope so!"

"There is no reason why you shouldn't be," asserted Florence, tenderly.

Fanny was silent a moment, and then said:

"There may be something come up, you know—" And then she paused and bent her eyes on the floor.

"What, dear?" urged Florence, earnestly. "What *could* come up?"

"I hope nothing, but—but—your father—"

"I understand," interrupted Florence. "You recognize him as the man who was with Livingstone, don't you?"

Fanny looked at her in surprise.

"Has he already recognized me?" she asked, in a frightened voice.

"Yes, we have been talking about it."

"Then I cannot stay here," cried Fanny, hiding her face and beginning to sob.

"Why not, dear?" pleaded Florence.

"From the way I spoke to Livingstone, he will conclude that I have not been a good girl, and he will drive me from the house."

"He will do nothing of the kind, my dear. He will undoubtedly seek the truth, and when he finds that

you are blameless, he will think the more kindly of you for having suffered."

Fanny sobbed in silence for some time, but at length raised her head, and asked:

"Do you really think he will not believe me capable of doing wrong?"

"I am sure of it, my dear. You can depend upon him to believe nothing but the truth and to act justly."

"Then I have no fear."

That night Florence wrote a letter to the old switchman, and enclosed a good-sized bank-note

CHAPTER XXIX.

PEACEFUL MOMENTS.

Matters at the quiet homestead went on in their usual humdrum fashion for the next few weeks without any material change. Everybody appeared to be contented, and, at Florence's request, they had ceased to speak of her little love-episode, and she, to all appearances, had entirely forgotten the affair. She and Fanny spent the greater part of the time in the fields or woods, hunting the few remaining autumn flowers, picking berries or simply loitering and enjoying the sunshine and each other's company.

It was a happy deliverance for poor Fanny. She was as one just released from prison, scarcely knowing what to do with her liberty. And yet she was somewhat jealous of her time, too, especially that to be spent out of doors. She seemed to fear that her probation would soon draw to a close, and she would be compelled to return to the cell again. She could not wait for the dew to get off the grass in the morning before she was out, if the weather was fine; and as she would stroll away across the fields, sometimes with Florence, sometimes alone, a sweet, rapt expression would light up her sad face, her soul would swell with gladness and she

would seem to drink in, with delicious satisfaction, every sight, sound and balmy odor of glorious nature.

"Oh, it is so good to be here!" she would say at times. And her voice would have that reverential softness that we are apt to assume when speaking of sacred things. "There is but one thing wanting to render my existence an ideal one," she once said.

"What is that, dear?" asked Florence.

"The complete forgetfulness that there was ever any other phase of my life, and of the apprehension that this may not last."

"Why cannot you forget these things, dear?" pleaded her friend. "There is no reason to think that it will not always last. I am sure that you will never go with my consent, and papa and mamma are too much devoted to you to think of letting you go."

"I know all that, Florence, dear," she sighed. "You are all very kind—too kind, in fact. It is more than I deserve; but something tells me that I am not to remain here for long."

"One of your old, gloomy premonitions," laughed Florence. "I was in hopes that you had forgotten them by this time."

"I strive to forget them, but they will force themselves on me in spite of my efforts to dispel them. I fear that I was never made to be entirely happy."

As Florence had said, her father and mother had taken a decided fancy to the gentle-spirited girl, and treated her with all the consideration of a daughter.

Mr. Meredith had never relinquished his idea of investigating the girl's case, and about two weeks after his return from New York he made another trip thither for that purpose. On the eve of his departure, however, Florence received a newspaper containing an account of the exhibition of new pictures at the Acad-

emy of Art, together with a list of the pictures which had taken first prizes, according to their class, and she saw that the one which headed the list was painted by Bernard Livingstone.

Her cheek burned with anger when she saw this, for, after what her father had told her about the mysterious name on the picture, she concluded at once that Livingstone had actually stolen the other man's work and usurped the honor. And when she showed it to her father, he was no less chagrined.

"I am astonished at this," he muttered, angrily. "It is a great disappointment to me, after the exalted estimate I had put upon that man. But there can no longer be any doubt about it, he is a scoundrel. I am now ready to believe anything of him, and shall be mistaken if I do not find that he was guilty of Fanny's disappointment. The effrontery of the rascal, to mark the copy and send it to us!"

A letter had come for Florence in the same mail, and as soon as they were done discussing the subject of the newspaper article she tore the letter open. The handwriting was familiar to her, and she thought at once that it was from Sydney Parkinson, but before reading it she looked at the signature and saw that it was that of Bernard Livingstone. It ran as follows:

"STUDIO BUILDING,—University Place,
NEW YORK, October 10, 18—.

"MY DEAR MISS MEREDITH (for it will doubtless be pleasanter for you to be called by that name): You will doubtless be surprised to receive this letter—at least with this signature, and also to see by the accompanying newspaper that my picture, which, I am proud to say, has won first prize, was signed by the same name. But your chief surprise will be to learn from me that the *signature is my own*, and the only one which I have any right to sign. Let me explain:

"Twenty-odd years ago, my father and his brother (who were twins and resembled each other as closely as my cousin—the man whom you have known as Bernard Livingstone—and myself) were deadly enemies, and sought every opportunity to injure each other. One day they met on the bridge known as Brothers Bridge, and fought, the result of which was that my uncle was killed and my father only escaped with his life. The feeling in the neighborhood was so bitter against my father that as soon as he recovered from his injuries he moved out of the neighborhood, and to escape the odium of the name which had become notorious through the long-continued vendetta, he changed his name from Livingstone to Parkinson. My uncle's eldest son and I, who was my father's eldest son, were exactly the same age and bore the same Christian name. But the strangest thing about it was that we were as much alike in appearance as our fathers had been.

"I was but five years old when my father moved out of the country and settled in New York city, and my cousin and I never met, so far as either of us know, until the day when he and his friends met you and myself in the Faubourg St. Germain, Paris. Unfortunately for me, I did not see him then, but he saw me, and then it was that the 'experiment,' as he calls it, commenced, which has caused so much trouble to both you and myself. After I met him and found what a noble, honorable man he is, and that he was not afraid to wear the name by which he had been baptized, I determined to emulate his courage and resume my rightful name. Ashamed of the want of courage I had displayed in not using greater effort to find you when you had run away from him, I had determined to release you from any vows by which you might consider yourself bound to me, and in my desperation I slipped into the house to which my picture had been taken and signed the name 'Bernard Livingstone' to the picture, considering that no matter in whose name the picture was entered at the Academy, my own rightful signature would attest that I was the author of it. But now that I have achieved a name and a modest fortune by my effort, I feel that I can conscientiously offer you both, and plead for the position in your affections I believe I once held.

"By naming the day when I may come and see you, you will render forever happy,

"Your own, "BERNARD LIVINSGTONE,
"Formerly known as
"SYDNEY PARKINSON."

When she had finished reading the letter Florence took it to her father. The old gentleman took the letter, adjusted his glasses and read it over carefully, and at its conclusion heaved a great sigh.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "I wonder if we are ever to get at the end of this mystery?"

"What do you think, papa?" questioned Florence, watching his face curiously.

"What do I think?" he cried, brusquely. "I think that the fellow is a mountebank of the first water."

"What makes you think so?" she queried, curiously.

"The fact that he hadn't the courage to come out like a man and tell me the truth in the first place, for one thing; and, for another, the fact that he has taken all the credit for the picture on himself, when, as a matter of fact, the other man is responsible for the best part; in fact, the only part of it that has made it famous. The picture wouldn't have taken fourth place, if it had received passing notice, except for the one portrait, the one of yourself, my dear, which Livingstone put into it. Another thing, he has, in all probability, accepted the twenty-five hundred dollars which the other man intended for the two of you."

"What would you advise with regard to answering his letter?" she next asked.

"I would advise that you pay no attention to it," he retorted, bluntly. "What right has he to write to another man's wife? His letter is an insult!"

"And Mr. Livingstone—I mean the other Mr. Livingstone—what would you advise with regard to him?"

Her father pondered a moment.

"Oh, well," he finally said, in a gentler tone, "we shall see about him. To tell you the truth, I am more and more impressed with him by everything I see or hear of him, and I am very anxious to find out more about him. If he turns out to be what I am convinced he is—well, we shall see, my dear. For the present reserve your affections and let matters rest till I come back."

And thus the matter ended for the time being.

Mr. Meredith made his trip to New York, not forgetting to take the pawn-checks for Florence's jewelry, in order to be able to redeem them when he should reach the city.

In three days he returned, flushed with triumph. Calling Florence to one side, he commenced:

"My dear, my trip has been a complete success. Livingstone has convinced me that he is not the man who deceived Fanny, by proving that he had not been in New York for five years until a month before he came out here. Not only that, I have made inquiries and discovered that he bears the most unblemished reputation, both here and abroad. He turned the twenty-five hundred dollars over to Parkinson on his assurance that you had agreed to marry him on being released, which, as you are aware, was an infamous lie, and shows the fellow to be an unprincipled rogue, unworthy of any respectable woman's notice. And, lastly, here is your jewelry," he went on, handing her a package. "And here is a ring which I did not get from the pawnbroker," he pursued, giving her the ring which she had given to the Italian boy.

"Where in the world did you get that?" she exclaimed, opening her eyes very wide.

"From the boy to whom you gave it," he smiled. "You did not expect to see that again, did you, my dear?"

"Never. But how came you to run across it?"

"My dear, it was through that ring that I discovered where you had been stopping."

He then went on to relate the incident of his meeting with the boy, of his absently giving the boy the money, of the boy showing him the ring, and of its ultimately leading to the discovery of Mrs. McQuade's boarding-house.

"And I called upon the old wretch!" he concluded.

"And made her refund the money?" questioned Florence.

"No, I allowed her to keep the money, as she pleaded poverty, and all that sort of thing; but I had the satisfaction of telling her what I thought of people who transacted business in the manner she did."

"I supposed she was crushed, wasn't she?" laughed Florence.

"Not a bit of it."

"She was, at least, very angry?"

"On the contrary, she invited me to stop to dinner," rejoined the old man brusquely. "You might as well butt your head against a stone wall and expect to make an impression as to attempt to phase that woman. She's like one of those topsy-turvy pictures the children have—turn her over as often as you please, and there will always be a head uppermost."

There was an interval of silence, and then Florence asked, without looking up from the embroidery upon which she was at work:

"Did you see Sydney while you were there, papa?"

"No," he returned, shortly. "I called two or three times at the studio, but he always managed, either accidentally or by design, to be out. But I was not over-desirous of seeing him, except to give him a piece of my mind."

Another month passed, and there was no news from either of the young men, and their names were rarely spoken in the homestead. The weather had begun to grow crisp and even chilly upon occasion; nevertheless, Fanny insisted upon taking her usual strolls, and if Florence would not accompany her she went alone. About this time her friends began to notice alarming symptoms in the poor girl. What had at first been mistaken for the return of health's bloom to her cheeks, developed into what was unmistakably the warning harbinger of consumption—the hectic flush. This caused her friends the greatest alarm, and, without notifying her of their sad discovery, they called in the family physician and had him prescribe for her. It was also agreed that she should be taken to a drier atmosphere before the winter set in.

Whether the girl suspected the nature of her malady or not, she never complained, and kept up a degree of cheerfulness that was surprising. And she would insist on taking her daily ramble, in spite of the protestations of her friends.

One day she and Florence had strayed a long way from the house to a piece of woods, along which, and bordering the road, ran an old fence. The fence was completely hidden from view by briars and creeping vines. Among the latter were numerous clematis vines, and the girls were busy gathering these for the purpose of decorating their rooms. Fanny had strayed away some distance from Florence in the direction of the homestead, when Florence was suddenly startled by

the sound of a horse's hoofs on the highway, and on looking up from her occupation, was surprised to behold Sydney Parkinson within a few feet of her.

He had reined up, and was sitting on his horse, looking at her and smiling. There was not a shadow of a doubt about its being he, and the girl instinctively recoiled from him, whereupon he spoke.

"You are not afraid of me, are you, Miss Florence?" he said, in a low, gentle voice.

"What brings you here?" she demanded, regaining her self-possession and courage at the same time.

"To see you, of course," he answered in the same calm, dispassionate tone. "You ignored my letter, which should have taught me, I suppose, that your love for me had died; but I was emboldened by my own devotion to come unbidden. Am I not welcome?"

"No!" she retorted, firmly. "I do not want to see you any more!"

"What, may I ask, is the cause of this sudden and unaccountable change in you?"

To this question she offered no response, and he continued:

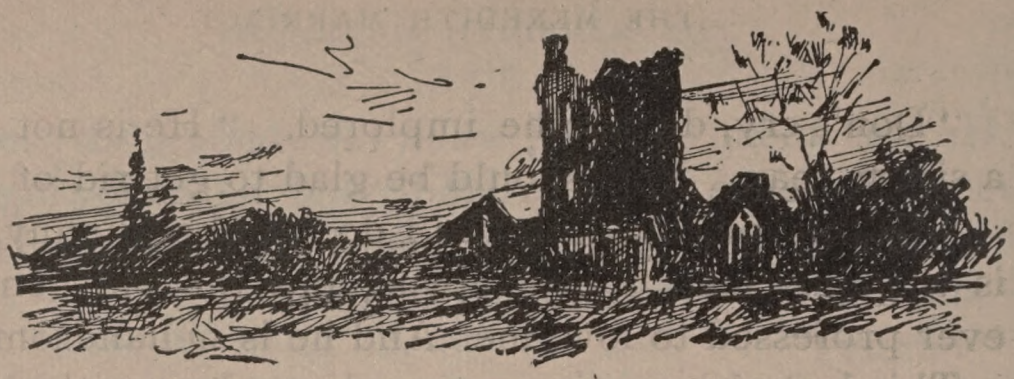
"I hope that you have not become infatuated with the man who had no more regard for your good name or feelings than to subject you to a disgraceful mock marriage for the purpose of winning a bet. If that is the case—"

"I do not wish to discuss that matter at all," interrupted Florence, almost fiercely. "I have not become infatuated with him, if that is any satisfaction to you; but so far as subjecting me to a mock marriage is concerned—if that were true, which it is not—for the purpose of winning a bet, it was no worse than your accepting half the money which he won thereby, nor as bad."

He was about to reply, when the rustle of dry leaves caused Florence to look round; and he, following the direction of her gaze, was heard to utter a peculiar groan, and the involuntary exclamation:

"Fanny!"

"Yes, we meet again, Bernard Livingstone," responded Fanny, quietly. "I am sorry to have intruded upon your *tête-à-tête*, but it is probably just as well to let this innocent girl know who and what you are before she is contaminated by your leprous touch!"



CHAPTER XXX.

REST AT LAST.

Florence stole a look at Parkinson's face, expecting to see it blanched or crestfallen at the very least; but, to her surprise, there was no indication of any emotion or mental perturbation of any kind. On the contrary, it was as placid as an autumn sky, and, with the exception of a vague sarcastic smile about the mouth and a slight quizzical glint in the eyes, innocent of any sort of expression whatever.

He seemed on the point of making some sort of retort to Fanny's words, but suddenly changed his mind, wheeled his horse, lifted his hat chivalrously, and said:

"Well, ladies, as I do not appear to be exuberantly welcome here, I shall bid you a very good day."

And burying his spurs in the horse's flanks, dashed away.

Fanny watched the retreating figure as long as it was in sight, and then trailing herself wearily to Florence's side, put her arms about her neck and burst into tears. She uttered no word, but for a long time continued to weep as if her heart were breaking. Florence strove in vain to comfort her.

"Don't cry, dear," she implored. "He is not worth a single tear. You should be glad to get rid of him."

"Not if you loved him as I do," sobbed Fanny. "He is the only man I ever loved, and the only one who ever professed to love me. And he is *so* handsome!"

This last observation was so discordant with the rest of her remarks that Florence could hardly suppress a smile, but she preserved her gravity with an effort and continued to soothe the poor, heart-broken girl. In time Fanny grew calm, and at length said, in a tone of grave philosophy:

"I guess you are right, Florence; it will be better to forget him entirely, and I shall strive hard to do so; but I hope he will not let me see him again. The sight of his face calls up such memories that I cannot endure it."

And then, after a thoughtful silence:

"It is so strange that it should have been the same man. I can understand now the cause of your agitation when I mentioned his name once while we were in the boarding-house. But how brave you were not to break down, and how good of you not to feel any bitterness toward me for loving the same man."

Florence laughed, although if Fanny had been less ingenuous she might have detected just the slightest shade of bitterness in her friend's laughter.

"It did not require much of a struggle," said she. "There were two excellent reasons why I should not feel any bitterness toward you. First, I did not love him deeply enough to preclude the possibility of throwing it off as I might a superfluous garment; and, second, I felt too kindly toward you."

"Oh, you are so good, Florence!" cried Fanny in the fullness of her heart, embracing her friend again. "I know I could never have had a sister with half your

tenderness. You always succeed in quieting the ache in my heart, as no one else could do."

After Sydney Parkinson (as we must continue to know him) left the two girls on the highway, he dashed on with unabated speed in the direction of the Brothers Bridge, as though intent upon some vital object. If those who had witnessed his calm, unimpassioned countenance during his brief interview with the young ladies could have seen it now it would have caused them some surprise. The vague smile of derision had melted from his mouth, and the quizzical glint had died out of his dark eyes, and in their stead was a malicious scowl and a sinister twinkle in the cruel eyes. His lips were tightly compressed, his brows were bent and the lines of his face drawn into the most ferocious aspect, while, as he galloped along, looking neither to the right nor to the left, a muttered imprecation escaped his lips ever and anon ; and, altogether, it was evident that a dreadful hatred and longing for vengeance was rankling in his heart.

Thus he continued until the ten miles or so intervening between the homestead and Brothers Bridge were covered, and he reined in his steed and descended the long hill at a gentle canter ; and, strange to say, with the slackening of his gait his features relaxed to such a degree that his expression was almost gentle as he neared the approach to the bridge. Perhaps the recollection of pleasing reminiscences was the occasion of this, or, possibly, his anger had burned itself out by this time, and he had suddenly resolved not to carry out his scheme of vengeance after all. Howbeit, his expression had so changed, and his face had assumed so sweet a smile, that had poor Fanny seen it then her heart would have ached more cruelly then ever.

But as his horse's hoofs struck the bridge, and Park-

inson glanced carelessly toward the opposite end, his countenance lowered with a cloud of ten-fold blacker malignance than it had worn before. This was superinduced by the appearance of another horseman, and that other horseman was none other than Bernard Livingstone !

His first impulse upon seeing his cousin was to stop or perhaps turn back, but upon second thought he spurred his horse and pushed on. Livingstone, meanwhile, had apparently not noticed his approach. He rode leisurely, his eyes slowly sweeping the magnificent landscape, while his face wore the gracious serenity of a man who is at peace with all the world. He did not turn his eyes in the direction of his cousin until they were within a horse's length of each other, and even then it is likely that his attention was called to him by his suddenly reining up and wheeling his horse in Livingstone's course, so that he could not choose but stop. As he glanced about quickly and caught sight of the scowling visage before him, Livingstone recoiled and shuddered involuntarily. Then, before he had time to consider anything, came the cold, blood-curdling words :

" Bernard Livingstone, prepare to fight !"

" Why, cousin, what do you mean ?" faltered the other, turning deadly pale. " I don't understand—"

" Prepare to fight !" was the reiterated command. " If you are unarmed, take this !"

And before the astonished man was aware of the other's intent, Parkinson had thrust a long knife into his hand and wheeled his horse away.

Livingstone glanced timidly at the blade he held in his hand and shuddered, for he recognized it as one of the two bowie-knives with which their fathers had fought to the death more than twenty years before.

But brief as was his contemplation of the dreadful weapon, it was disturbed the next instant by the voice of his cousin, who had ridden to some distance off, saying :

"Remember, it was my father who won before. Look out for yourself !"

And before he had time for another thought, Parkinson spurred his horse and came dashing down upon him with the velocity of the wind.

Livingstone had no time to prepare for defense, and only escaped the murderous knife, as the other swept by, by throwing himself down upon the pommel of his saddle. By the time he recovered himself and sat erect again Parkinson had nearly reached the other approach of the bridge, and wheeled his horse preparatory to another dash.

"Coward !" he hissed. "If you will not defend yourself, die like the cur that you are !"

With that he buried the rowels of his spurs in his horse's flanks and came dashing on again ; but he did not find Livingstone unprepared this time. The insult, no less than the realization that his cousin was bent upon taking his life, aroused him to a spirit of resistance, and wheeling his horse about, he raised his dagger and nerved his arm for the attack.

On came his antagonist. The two men were again abreast. The knives clashed and locked. The two men glared at each other, and there was murder in their eyes. Then ensued a terrible struggle. The weapons were locked in such a way that neither could withdraw his without breaking the other's grip, and each realized that his life depended upon preventing this. For some moments the struggle seemed about evenly balanced. There was not a shade of difference in the strength of the two men, and one was equally

brave with the other. But at length something occurred to change the status of affairs. Parkinson's horse, which was exceedingly spirited, kept prancing about so that it was difficult to hold him in position with one hand, and the animal finally lost patience, gave a sudden rear and plunge, not only breaking the lock of the men, but nearly unseating his rider. This heightened the rage of Parkinson, and as soon as he could control his horse sufficiently, he wheeled him and made a mad, random plunge at his antagonist. The latter was wholly unprepared for it, but managed dexterously to parry the thrust by a hair's-breadth.

This was all he intended to do, and his knife, as it was aimed, would have passed Parkinson's body and left it unscathed, but in the very nick of time the latter's horse plunged in such a way as to hurl his rider almost upon the pommel of Livingstone's saddle, thus bringing him within range of the descending blade, and it was buried to the hilt in Parkinson's breast.

The man reeled from his saddle and fell to the ground, to all appearances lifeless.

Shocked, terrified at what he had done, Livingstone ventured one hasty glance at the unfortunate man on the ground, and then put spurs to his horse and rode back with all speed to the wayside inn and reported what had happened. Ten minutes later old John, all of his help, and several loungers who happened to be about the place, surrounded the wounded man on the bridge, and he was carried to the inn. A doctor was called in, but it was soon apparent that Sydney Parkinson was beyond human aid. He recovered consciousness once for a few minutes only. He opened his eyes and stared dreamily about the room where he lay, allowing his eyes to rest for an instant upon each face that came within their range, until at last they rested

upon the face of Bernard Livingstone. They stopped there for nearly a minute, gazing earnestly, inquiringly, half doubtfully, and at length the man beckoned feebly for Livingstone to approach the bedside. He did so, with bowed head and sorrowful countenance, when the stricken man put out his hand and in a feeble, almost inarticulate voice said :

"Take my hand, cousin, and say that I am forgiven. You have killed me, but it was all my fault. You did it in self-defense, and I deserved it all. I forgive you, as I hope you will forgive me."

Livingstone took the hand, and as the man ceased speaking, sank upon his knees at the bedside and manifested the depth of his grief in silent weeping more eloquently than words could have portrayed it. After a little time the dying man spoke again, still more feebly this time :

"I have been a villain and a weak fool all my life, and I never committed a more villainous or foolish act than in attempting to kill you, my cousin, my friend, and the noblest, bravest man I ever met. I have not long to live, Bernard, and I have one request to make before I die. It is that you marry Florence. She loves you, I am sure ; and I want you to tell her that my dying request was that she should become your wife. The money you gave me, together with what I received for the picture, is here in my pocket. I had intended to take it to her, but she spurned me, as I deserved, so I want you to take it for yourself—and her."

He ceased speaking, closed his eyes wearily, and a few moments later, when the doctor examined the man's pulse, it had ceased beating. Sydney Parkinson, or Bernard Livingstone, had passed away. He had died in ignorance of the fact that Florence and Bernard were married.

"Hit was bound to be thet way," murmured old John, a little later. "Hit was in the blood. His daddy killed t' other boy's daddy, his own brother, an' left the pizen in his son's veins. Hit couldn't 'a' bin no other way. But I do hope an' trust thet the feud 's washed out now forever."

When Bernard delivered his message to Florence the following day, she was deeply affected as well as shocked; but when she had been assured by the many witnesses acquainted with the facts that no blame could be attached to Bernard, she became reconciled and even cheerful.

The next afternoon the family, and that of the old landlord and a few other friends, followed the dead man's remains to the little cemetery attached to the little chapel where Florence and Livingstone were married, but the only real mourner was the poor, heart-broken Fanny. Th poore creature could not have been more profoundly stricken if the man over whom she wept had acted the part of a noble and generous friend instead of that of a base deceiver.

"No matter what his faults were," she sobbed, "he was the only man who ever told me that he loved me, and he was the only man whom I ever loved, and my heart is buried with him."

As Bernard and Florence rode back from the cemetery together he asked, taking her hand in his own:

"What have you to say, Florence, with regard to Sydney's dying request?"

She was silent and averted her face.

"Mind," he quickly pursued, "I do not wish that you should feel yourself bound or even influenced by a dying man's words. I only alluded to them by way of introducing a subject which has been burning at my heart ever since the day we met in Baden-Baden and I

laid siege to your affections in a false character. That I have loved you devotedly from that moment I scarcely need tell you now. And I do not believe that I deserve the charge of egotism when I assume that my conduct was a little more than ordinarily honorable in refusing to avail myself of the advantage which circumstances had given me over both your dear self and my rival. You manifested a want of love for me after our marriage, and you may still feel that way. If you do, and consider that my conduct has been anything else but honorable, say so at once, and, while I love you, adore you, as no man ever adored a woman, I believe I can still act the part of honor to the extent of going away and never troubling you again."

Florence looked up with an expression of mingled tenderness and apprehension.

"I almost ought to tell you to go," she whispered, softly. "You have been awfully wicked."

"I confess that I have, dear," he pleaded. "But will you not give me a chance to atone? I am willing to do anything within the range of reason to convince you how thoroughly repentant I am, and how devotedly I love you. Only say what you wish me to do, and I am at your command."

Florence was silent and looked out of the carriage window.

"Why didn't you give me your right name?" she murmured.

"Because I was a bad boy, for one thing; and for another, and principally, because my love for my little Florence was so strong that I was willing to do anything to win her, even resort to deception."

"You didn't marry me just to win the wager, then?"

This was uttered in a demure, tentative little voice, but it sent an arrow hurtling to Livingstone's heart.

"As God is my witness, I did not, dear," he uttered in a broken voice. "If I had, the marriage would have been a mock one, as was first intended. Realizing that such an act would cast a shadow upon your pure name, my heart would not permit me to carry out the devilish scheme, although, God knows, no harm was intended to your sweet self. The plan was simply to go through the ceremony of the mock-marriage, and then detain you at the inn till Parkinson's arrival, when the ruse would be explained, and you and he could have proceeded to the altar in earnest; but at the last moment, when you refused to avail yourself of the offer of release, my love, my devotion—perhaps I ought to say my selfishness—got the better of me, and I allowed the ceremony to go on in good faith. It was my love and my selfishness, darling. Is there forgiveness in my little wife's heart?"

Florence sighed heavily.

"If you had only told me that night on the way to New York," she faltered, "I could have forgiven you so easily. But—"

"But you cannot now?" he interrupted.

"I didn't say that, exactly," she caught up, quickly, "but—we *are* married, aren't we?" she suddenly broke off.

"Yes, love, in the eyes of God and of the law, we are man and wife, notwithstanding I gave the parson the wrong name."

She hesitated a moment, colored a good deal, and ventured, timidly:

"But it doesn't seem as if we were married, and I am going to impose the cruelest sort of a penance on you."

"What is it, dear?" he gasped, eagerly. "It cannot be too severe, so that it bring absolution in the end."

"I want you to go away and not come back till the

day before Christmas. Write to me every day, and I shall write to you every day ; but I do not want to see you till then. Then on the day before Christmas you may come, and on Christmas Eve we will be married, truly, truly, truly !"

"It is a bargain, love !" he cried, rapturously, grasping her hand. "Thank Heaven, I am forgiven !"

Some inexplicable impulse at that moment seemed to take possession of Florence—an impulse which rendered her powerless to control her passion—and she threw herself into his arms, buried her face in his bosom and began to sob.

"I do love you !" she cried, passionately. "Oh, I do love you with all my heart !"

The succeeding instant she seemed to realize that she had acted with undue forwardness, and attempted to withdraw herself from her position, but it was too late. Bernard had taken her in his strong arms and held her there, and had turned her face, crimson and burning with mingled passion and shame, up to his own, and was showering kisses upon the unprotected pink lips.

Nobody could have been happier, in spite of her own heartache, than was poor Fanny, when Florence confided to her the secret of her reconciliation to Bernard, that night in the sacred privacy of their own room.

But the poor girl's grief was too deep to be assuaged more than temporarily, and she began to droop from the moment she saw Parkinson laid beneath the sod. She became an easy prey to the merciless disease which had already taken possession of her, and she was soon confined to her room. It was a severe trial to her to be deprived of the sunshine, and even when the winter had come on she would sit at her window and look out with hungry eyes and a longing heart upon

the snowy landscape, and would plead so piteously to be taken forth that her friends were often prone to yield to her persuasion, in the face of the doctor's injunctions.

By Christmas time she had grown too weak to leave her bed, and yet when Florence was married, on Christmas Eve, the poor girl insisted upon being carried down into the old-fashioned parlor, where she was propped up long enough to witness the ceremony. She seemed delighted with the simple decorations, and smiled sadly when Florence kissed her after the ceremony.

"Oh, I am so happy!" she whispered, between racking fits of coughing. "It was the one thing in my poor life that I wished to see before I died. Now I can die contented."

And two days later her mission was fulfilled, and the poor, tired spirit went to its rest at last, and she was laid beside the man she had loved so blindly and foolishly.

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